
"We've had class warfare for a very long time"

A speech by Howard Zinn

Howard Zinn was one of several people who, along with keynote speaker Ralph Nader, addressed a crowd of 12,000 in Boston on October 1, 2000. He is the author of A People's History of the United States.

I have heard all the arguments about the lesser evil, but I know that if we keep voting for the lesser evil, we forever get nothing but evil. I do not want to surrender my conscience to a corrupt political system.

Have you noticed that our political leaders and the press are watching places all over the world to make sure they have free elections? They're watching Peru, watching Yugoslavia, and Indonesia, lamenting the lack of free elections in Cuba. But how about ours? It seems to me an election where a candidate needs \$150 or \$200 million dollars to have a chance is not a free election. An election that excludes important candidates from the national debate is not a democratic election.

They are keeping Ralph Nader out of the debates because he has a fatal flaw: He tells the truth. When the debates take place Tuesday at the University of Massachusetts, there will be a nonviolent protest. There will be placards that ask: *Where is Ralph Nader? Where is democracy?* Democracy requires a free marketplace of ideas. Well, we are here today to keep the spirit of democracy alive.

There was a rare interesting moment in this campaign. That was when Bush accused Gore of stirring up class warfare. Well, we have had class warfare in this country for a very long time, not between the Democratic and Republican Parties, but a war waged by both parties against the vast majority of the American people. It began long ago, with the first European settlements on this continent--with wealthy landowners on one side and indentured white servants and Black slaves on the other side. When the rich merchants of Boston sent an army to put down a rebellion of farmers in western Massachusetts, when the wealthy white men known as our Founding Fathers fashioned a Constitution designed to prevent more rebellion, to maintain control of the country by slaveowners, merchants, manufacturers, and Western expansionists, that was class warfare.

And it went on, as the government in the hands of the rich gave huge grants of land to the railroads and depletion allowances to the oil companies and tariffs for the manufacturers--yes, corporate welfare. We have had class warfare every time the army and the National Guard and the police were used to attack working people who went out on strike. When the leaders of government sent our young men to war, that was class warfare because the soldiers were mostly poor and those killed in these wars were disproportionately people of color.

Eugene Debs, the great socialist leader who ran as a third-party candidate, protested World War I. He said, "It is the master class that makes the war, and the working class that fights it." That could not be tolerated and he was sentenced to ten years in prison. That war against the poor--against mothers trying to raise families, against people of color, against immigrants--

continues. And it is bipartisan. Democrats and Republicans--the parties of Bush and Gore--collaborated in that shameful law that took away federal help for mothers living in poverty trying to care for their families. They called it welfare reform, but it was a war against the poor, a war against children. Democrats and Republicans collaborated in taking away food stamps from poor people, in punishing immigrant families and their children for not being born in this country.

Democrats and Republicans joined to build more prisons [and] extend the death penalty in the crime bill of 1996. We have two million people in prison, most of them poor and disproportionately people of color. That is class war. Both parties, all four candidates, Bush and Cheney, Gore and Lieberman, agree on spending a huge portion of our national wealth to prepare for war. They agree on maintaining an enormous military establishment, which means huge profits for the corporations that get the contracts. All four candidates have supported the wars we have waged against Panama, Iraq, Yugoslavia. They have supported the sanctions that have killed hundreds of thousands of children in Iraq, the embargo that tries to strangle the people of Cuba, the bombings of the Sudan and Afghanistan and Yugoslavia--then standing by while children starve in Africa and AIDS spreads.

They have supported the class war against the poor--here and in the rest of the world. I cannot bear to pull the lever on Election Day in support of that. I am for Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke because someone must speak the truth. Someone must say: Ours is a country of enormous wealth. We can use that wealth to guarantee to every American free medical care, decent housing, work at a living wage, child care and nurseries, clean air and clean water. No one should be without these things, and no child should be taught by underpaid teachers in dilapidated schools. Do right by our children.

If the American people were allowed to hear that message, if we really had free and democratic elections, our next president and vice president would be Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke.

When ninety or a hundred million people--half the voting population--will not vote, how can it be called a democratic election? And why don't they vote? We caught a glimpse of the answer when, last month, a *New York Times* reporter spoke to working women in Cross City, Florida, about the election and concluded: "People here look at Al Gore and George W. Bush and see two men born to the country club, men whose family histories jingle with silver spoons. They appear, to people here, just the same." A woman working the cash register at a local filling station said, "I don't think they think about people like us, and if they do care, they're not going to do anything for us." An African American woman who manages a shift at McDonald's said, "They look the same to me.... I don't even pay attention to those two, and all my friends say the same thing. My life won't change." The *Times* reporter wrote: "It is an ugly thought, but it crosses her mind now and then. She thinks the candidates would be happier if people like her did not exist at all."

Ralph Nader may not win, but he represents the American people and their deepest desires and needs in a way that neither Gore nor Bush can possibly match. Whether Democrats or Republicans are in power--and we have a lot of historical experience that tells us this--corporate power will dominate the country, the military-industrial establishment will be in power, the war against the poor will continue, and we will need a movement, a great national movement, to oppose that. If Bush is elected, Gore will fade away. If Gore is elected, Bush will disappear (he may be a mirage anyway). Ralph Nader will still be here, all of us will still be here, and we will be joined by millions of others in a great national movement. The Democrats and Republicans represent the past, the long history of war against the poor. The day will come when

their power--held together by money and lies and violence--will fall, as racial segregation fell, as the twelve-hour day fell, as the subordination of women fell, as apartheid in South Africa fell, as the Berlin Wall fell, as dictators in Spain and Portugal and the Philippines fell, because people would not give up. The powerless, organized, become powerful. Minorities, persistent, grow into majorities. We don't know when it will happen, but the day must come when there will be justice for women, for people of color, for the poor of the world, when the stupidity of war will be recognized, and military machines dismantled, and the world made safe for children. It is up to us to keep that hope alive, to keep democracy alive.