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Howard Zinn on “War and Social Justice”



Howard Zinn is one of this country’s most celebrated historians. His classic work *A People’s History of the United States* changed the way we look at history in America. First published a quarter of a century ago, the book has sold over a million copies and is a phenomenon in the world of publishing—selling more copies each successive year. After serving as a bombardier in World War II, Howard Zinn went on to become a lifelong dissident and peace activist. He was active in the civil rights movement and many of the struggles for social justice over the past forty years. He taught at Spelman College, the historically black college for women, and was fired for insubordination for standing up for the students. He was recently invited back to give the commencement address. Howard Zinn has written numerous books and is professor emeritus at Boston University. He recently spoke at Binghamton University a few days after the 2008 presidential election. His speech was called “War and Social Justice.” [includes rush transcript]

AMY GOODMAN: Howard Zinn is one of this country’s most celebrated historians. His classic work, *A People’s History of the United States*, changed the way we look at history in America. First published a quarter of a century ago, the book has sold over a million copies and is a phenomenon in the world of publishing, selling more copies each successive year.

After serving as a bombardier pilot in World War II, Howard Zinn went on to become a lifelong dissident and peace activist. He was active in the civil rights movement and many of the struggles for social justice over the past half-century. He taught at Spelman College, the historically black college for women in Atlanta, and was fired for insubordination for standing up for the women.

Howard Zinn has written numerous books. He’s Professor Emeritus at Boston University. He recently spoke at Binghamton University, Upstate New York, a few days after the 2008 presidential election. His speech was called “War and Social Justice.”

HOWARD ZINN: Why is all the political rhetoric limited? Why is the set of solutions given to social and economic issues so cramped and so short of what is needed, so short of what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights demands? And, yes, Obama, who obviously is more attuned to the needs of people than his opponent, you know, Obama, who is more far-sighted, more thoughtful, more imaginative, why has he been limited in what he is saying? Why hasn't he come out for what is called a single-payer system in healthcare?

Why—you see, you all know what the single-payer system is. It's a sort of awkward term for it, maybe. It doesn't explain what it means. But a single-payer health system means—well, it will be sort of run like Social Security. It'll be a government system. It won't depend on intermediaries, on middle people, on insurance companies. You won't have to fill out forms and pay—you know, and figure out whether you have a preexisting medical condition. You won't have to go through that rigamarole, that rigamarole which has kept 40 million people out of having health insurance. No, something happens, you just go to a doctor, you go to a hospital, you're taken care of, period. The government will pay for it. Yeah, the government will pay for it. That's what governments are for.

Governments, you know—they do that for the military. Did you know that? That's what the military has. The military has free insurance. I was once in the military. I got pneumonia, which is easier to get in the military. I got pneumonia. I didn't have to fool around with deciding what health plan I'm in and what—you know. No, I was totally taken care of. I didn't have to think about money. Just—you know, there are a million members of the armed forces who have that. But when you ask that the government do this for everybody else, they cry, "That's socialism!" Well, if that's socialism, it must mean socialism is good. You know.

No, I was really gratified when Obama called for "Let's tax the rich more, and let's tax the poor and middle class less." And they said, "That's socialism." And I thought, "Whoa! I'm happy to hear that. Finally, socialism is getting a good name." You know, socialism has been given bad names, you know, Stalin and all those socialists, so-called socialists. They weren't really socialist, but, you know, they called themselves socialist. But they weren't really, you see. And so, socialism got a bad name. It used to have a really good name. Here in the United States, the beginning of the twentieth century, before there was a Soviet Union to spoil it, you see, socialism had a good name. Millions of people in the United States read socialist newspapers. They elected socialist members of Congress and socialist members of state legislatures. You know, there were like fourteen socialist chapters in Oklahoma. Really. I mean, you know, socialism—who stood for socialism? Eugene Debs, Helen Keller, Emma Goldman, Clarence Darrow, Jack London, Upton Sinclair. Yeah, socialism had a good name. It needs to be restored.

And so—but Obama, with all of his, well, good will, intelligence, all those qualities that he has, and so on—and, you know, you feel that he has a certain instinct for people in trouble. But still, you know, he wouldn't come out for a single-payer health system, that is, for what I would call health security, to go along with Social Security, you see, wouldn't come out for that; wouldn't come out for the government creating jobs for

millions of people, because that's what really is needed now. You see, when people are—the newspapers this morning report highest unemployment in decades, right? The government needs to create jobs. Private enterprise is not going to create jobs. Private enterprise fails, the so-called free market system fails, fails again and again. When the Depression hit in the 1930s, Roosevelt and the New Deal created jobs for millions of people. And, oh, there were people on the—you know, out there on the fringe who yelled “Socialism!” Didn't matter. People needed it. If people need something badly, and somebody does something for them, you can throw all the names you want at them, it won't matter, you see? But that was needed in this campaign. Yes.

Instead of Obama and McCain joining together—I know some of you may be annoyed that I'm being critical of Obama, but that's my job. You know, I like him. I'm for him. I want him to do well. I'm happy he won. I'm delighted he won. But I'm a citizen. I have to speak my mind. OK? Yeah. And, you know—but when I saw Obama and McCain sort of both together supporting the \$700 billion bailout, I thought, “Uh-oh. No, no. Please don't do that. Please, Obama, step aside from that. Do what—I'm sure something in your instincts must tell you that there's something wrong with giving \$700 billion to the same financial institutions which ruined us, which got us into this mess, something wrong with that, you see.” And it's not even politically viable. That is, you can't even say, “Oh, I'm doing it because people will then vote for me.” No. It was very obvious when the \$700 billion bailout was announced that the majority of people in the country were opposed to it. Instinctively, they said, “Something is wrong with this. Why give it to them? We need it.”

That's when the government—you know, Obama should have been saying, “No, let's take that \$700 billion, let's give it to people who can't pay their mortgages. Let's create jobs, you know.” You know, instead of pouring \$700 billion into the top and hoping that it will trickle down to the bottom, no, go right to the bottom, where people need it and get—so, yes, that was a disappointment. So, yeah, I'm trying to indicate what we'll have to do now and to fulfill what Obama himself has promised: change, real change. You can't have—you can say “change,” but if you keep doing the old policies, it's not change, right?

So what stands in the way of Obama and the Democratic Party, and what stands in the way of them really going all out for a social and economic program that will fulfill the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Well, I can think of two things that stand in the way. Maybe there are more, but I can only think of two things at a time. And, well, one of them is simply the great, powerful economic interests that don't want real economic change. Really, they don't. The powerful—I mean, you take in healthcare, there are powerful interests involved in the present healthcare system. People are making lots of money from the healthcare system as it is, making so much money, and that's why the costs of the healthcare system in the United States are double what the healthcare costs are—the percentage, you know, of money devoted to healthcare—percentage is double, administrative costs in the United States, compared to countries that have the single-payer system, because there are people there who are siphoning off this money, who are making money. You know, they're health plans. They're insurance companies.

They're health executives and CEOs, so that there are—yeah, there are interests, economic interests that are in the way of real economic change.

And Obama so far has not challenged those economic interests. Roosevelt did challenge those economic interests, boldly, right frontally. He called them economic royalists. He wasn't worried that people would say, "Oh, you're appealing to class conflict," you know, the kind of thing they pull out all the time, as if there isn't, hasn't always been class conflict, just something new, you know. Class conflict. "You're creating class conflict. We've never had class conflict. We've always all been one happy family." You know, no. And so, yeah, there are these interests standing in the way, and, you know, unfortunately, the Democratic Party is tied to many of those interests. Democratic Party is, you know, tied to a lot of corporate interests. I mean, look at the people on Obama's—the people who are on Obama's economics team, and they're Goldman Sachs people, and they're former—you know, people like that, you know? That's not—they don't represent change. They represent the old-style Democratic stay-put leadership that's not good.

So, the other factor that stands in the way of a real bold economic and social program is the war. The war, the thing that has, you know, a \$600 billion military budget. Now, how can you call for the government to take over the healthcare system? How can you call for the government to give jobs to millions of people? How can you do all that? How can you offer free education, free higher education, which is what we should have really? We should have free higher education. Or how can you—you know. No, you know, how can you double teachers' salaries? How can you do all these things, which will do away with poverty in the United States? It all costs money.

And so, where's that money going to come from? Well, it can come from two sources. One is the tax structure. And here, Obama [has] been moving in the right direction. When he talked about not giving the rich tax breaks and giving tax breaks to the poor—in the right direction, but not far enough, because the top one percent of—the richest one percent of the country has gained several trillions of dollars in the last twenty, thirty years as a result of the tax system, which has favored them. And, you know, you have a tax system where 200 of the richest corporations pay no taxes. You know that? You can't do that. You don't have their accountants. You don't have their legal teams, and so on and so forth. You don't have their loopholes.

The war, \$600 billion, we need that. We need that money. But in order to say that, in order to say, "Well, one, we're going to increase taxes on the super rich," much more than Obama has proposed—and believe me, it won't make those people poor. They'll still be rich. They just won't be super rich. I don't care if there's some rich people around. But, you know, no, we don't need super rich, not when that money is needed to take care of little kids in pre-school, and there's no money for pre-school. No, we need a radical change in the tax structure, which will immediately free huge amounts of money to do the things that need to be done, and then we have to get the money from the military budget. Well, how do you get money from the military budget? Don't we need \$600 billion for a military budget? Don't we have to fight two wars? No. We don't have to fight any wars. You know.

And this is where Obama and the Democratic Party have been hesitant, you know, to talk about. But we're not hesitant to talk about it. The citizens should not be hesitant to talk about it. If the citizens are hesitant to talk about it, they would just reinforce the Democratic leadership and Obama in their hesitations. No, we have to speak what we believe is the truth. I think the truth is we should not be at war. We should not be at war at all. I mean, these wars are absurd. They're horrible also. They're horrible, and they're absurd. You know, from a human, human point of view, they're horrible. You know, the deaths and the mangled limbs and the blindness and the three million people in Iraq losing their homes, having to leave their homes, three million people—imagine?—having to look elsewhere to live because of our occupation, because of our war for democracy, our war for liberty, our war for whatever it is we're supposed to be fighting for.

No, we don't need—we need a president who will say—yeah, I'm giving advice to Obama. I know he's listening. But, you know, if enough people speak up, he will listen, right? If enough people speak up, he will listen. You know, there's much more of a chance of him listening, right, than those other people. They're not listening. They wouldn't listen. Obama could possibly listen, if we, all of us—and the thing to say is, we have to change our whole attitude as a nation towards war, militarism, violence. We have to declare that we are not going to engage in aggressive wars. We are going to renounce the Bush Doctrine of preventive war. “Oh, we have to go to”—you know, “We have to go to war on this little pitiful country, because this little pitiful country might someday”—do what? Attack us? I mean, Iraq might attack us? “Well, they're developing a nuclear weapon”—one, which they may have in five or ten years. That's what all the experts said, even the experts on the government side. You know, they may develop one nuclear weapon in five—wow! The United States has 10,000 nuclear weapons. Nobody says, “How about us?” you see. But, you know, well, you know all about that. Weapons of mass destruct, etc., etc. No reason for us to wage aggressive wars. We have to renounce war as an instrument of foreign policy.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Howard Zinn. He's speaking at Binghamton University, Upstate New York. If you'd like a copy of today's broadcast, you can go to our website at democracynow.org. Back to his speech in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return now to the legendary historian Howard Zinn. This was his first speech after the 2008 election. He was speaking on November 8th at Binghamton University, Upstate New York. He called his speech “War and Social Justice.”

HOWARD ZINN: A hundred different countries, we have military bases. That doesn't look like a peace-loving country. And besides—I mean, first of all, of course, it's very expensive. We save a lot of money. Do we really need those—what do we need those bases for? I can't figure out what we need those bases for. And, you know, so we have to—yeah, we have to give that up, and we have to declare ourselves a peaceful nation.

We will no longer be a military superpower. “Oh, that’s terrible!” There are people who think we must be a military superpower. We don’t have to be a military superpower. We don’t have to be a military power at all, you see? We can be a humanitarian superpower. We can—yeah. We’ll still be powerful. We’ll still be rich. But we can use that power and that wealth to help people all over the world. I mean, instead of sending helicopters to bomb people, send helicopters when they face a hurricane or an earthquake and they desperately need helicopters. You know, you know. So, yeah, there’s a lot of money available once you seriously fundamentally change the foreign policy of the United States.

Now, Obama has been hesitant to do that. And it has something to do with a certain mindset, because it doesn’t have anything to do really with politics, that is, with more votes. I don’t think—do you think most Americans know that we have bases in a hundred countries? I’ll bet you if you took a poll and asked among the American people, “How many countries do you think we have bases in?” “No, I don’t know exactly what the answer is. What I would guess, you know, there’d be like five, ten.” But I think most people would be surprised. In other words, there isn’t a public demanding that we have bases in a hundred countries, so there’s no political advantage to that. Well, of course, there’s economic advantage to corporations that supply those bases and build those bases and make profit from those bases, you know.

But in order to—and I do believe that the American people would welcome a president who said, “We are not going to wage aggressive war anymore.” The American people are not war-minded people. They become war-minded when a president gets up there and creates an atmosphere of hysteria and fear, you know, and says, “Well, we must go to war.” Then people, without thinking about it, without thinking, you know, “Why are we bombing Afghanistan?” “Because, oh, Osama bin Laden is there.” “Uh, where?” Well, they don’t really know, so we’ll bomb the country. You know, if we bomb the country, maybe we’ll get him. You see? Sure, in the process, thousands of Afghans will die, right? But—so, people didn’t have time to stop and think, think. But the American people are not war-minded people. They would welcome, I believe, a turn away from war. So there’s no real political advantage to that.

But it has to do with a mindset, a certain mindset that—well, that a lot of Americans have and that Obama, obviously, and the Democratic leadership, Pelosi and Harry Reid and the others, that they all still have. And when you talk about a mindset that they have, which stands in the way of the declaring against war, you’re reminded that during the campaign—I don’t know if you remember this—that at one point Obama said—and, you know, there were many times in the campaign where he said really good things, if he had only followed up on them, you see, and if he only follows up on them now. But at one point in the campaign, he said, “It’s not just a matter of getting out of Iraq. It’s a matter of changing the mindset that got us into Iraq.” You see? That was a very important statement. Unfortunately, he has not followed through by changing his mindset, you see? He knows somewhere in—well, then he expressed it, that we have to change our mindset, but he hasn’t done it. Why? I don’t know. Is it because there are too many people around

him and too many forces around him, and etc., etc., that...? But, no, that mindset is still there. So I want to talk about what that mindset is, what the elements of that mindset are.

And I have to look at my watch, not that it matters, not that I care, but, you know, I feel conscience-stricken over keeping you here just to hear the truth.

Here are some of the elements of the mindset that stand in the way, in the way for Obama, in the way for the Democratic Party, in the way for many Americans, in the way for us. One of the elements in our mindset is the idea, somehow, that the United States is exceptional. In the world of social science, in, you know, that discipline called social science, there's actually a phrase for it. It's called American exceptionalism. And what it means is the idea that the United States is unique in the world, you know, that we are different, that we—not just different, we're better. Right? We are better than other people. You know, our society is better than other societies. This is a very dangerous thing to think. When you become so arrogant that you think you are better and different than other countries in the world, then that gives you a *carte blanche* to do nasty things. You can do nasty things, because you're better. You're justified in doing those things, because, yeah, you're—we're different. So we have to divest ourselves of the idea that, you know, we are somehow better and, you know, we are the "City on the Hill," which is what the first governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, said. "We are the"—Reagan also said that. Well, Reagan said lots of things, you know that. But we are—you know, we're—you know, everybody looks to—no, we're an empire, like other empires.

There was a British empire. There was a Russian empire. There was a German empire and a Japanese empire and a French and a Belgian empire, the Dutch empire and the Spanish empire. And now there's the American empire. And our empire—and when we look at those empires, we say, "Oh, imperialism! But our empire, no." There was one sort of scholar who wrote in the *New York Times*, he said, "We are an empire lite." Lite? Tell that to the people of Iraq. Tell that to the people in Afghanistan. You know, we are an empire lite? No, we are heavy.

And yes—well, all you have to do is look at our history, and you'll see, no, our history does not show a beneficent country doing good all over the world. Our history shows expansion. Our history shows expansion. It shows us—well, yeah, it shows us moving into—doubling our territory with the Louisiana Purchase, which I remember on our school maps looked very benign. "Oh, there's that, all that empty land, and now we have it." It wasn't empty! There were people living there. There were Indian tribes. Hundreds of Indian tribes were living there, you see? And if it's going to be ours, we've got to get rid of them. And we did. No. And then, you know, we instigated a war with Mexico in 1846, 1846 to 1848, and at the end of the war we take almost half of Mexico, you know. And why? Well, we wanted that land. That's very simple. We want things. There's a drive of nations that have the power and the capacity to bully other nations, a tendency to expand into those—the areas that those other nations have. We see it all over the world. And the United States has done that again and again. And, you know, then we expanded into the Caribbean. Then we expanded out into the Pacific with Hawaii and the Philippines, and yeah. And, of course, you know, in the twentieth century, expanding our

influence in Europe and Asia and now in the Middle East, everywhere. An expansionist country, an imperialist power.

For what? To do good things for these other people? Or is it because we coveted—when I say “we,” I don’t mean to include you and me. But I’ve gotten—you know, they’ve gotten us so used to identifying with the government. You know, like we say “we,” like the janitor at General Motors says “we.” No. No, the CEO of General Motors and the janitor are not “we.”

So, no, we’re not—we’re not—exceptionalism is one part of the mindset we have to get rid of. We have to see ourselves honestly for what we are. We’re an empire like other empires. We’re as aggressive and brutal and violent as the Belgians were in the Congo, as the British were in India, and all these other empires. Yeah, we’re just like them. We have to face it. And when you face that, you sober up a little, and then you don’t think you can just go all over the world and say, “Ah, we’re doing this for liberty and democracy,” because then, if you know your history, you know how many times that was said. “Oh, we’re going into the Philippines to bring civilization and Christianity to the Filipinos.” “We’re going to bring civilization to the Mexicans,” etc., etc. No. You’ll understand that. Yeah, that’s one element in this mindset.

And then, of course, when you say this, when you say these things, when you go back into that history, when you try to give an honest recounting of what we have been—not “we,” really—what the government, the government, has done, our government has done. The people haven’t done it. People—we’re just people. The government does these things, and then they try to include us, involve us in their criminal conspiracy. You know, we didn’t do this. But they’re dragooning us into this.

But when you start criticizing, when you start making an honest assessment of what we have done in the world, they say you’re being unpatriotic. Well, you have to—that’s another part of the mindset you have to get rid of, because if you don’t, then you think you have to wear a flag in your lapel or you think you have to always have American flags around you, and you have to show, by your love for all this meaningless paraphernalia, that you are patriotic. Well, that’s, you know—oh, there, too, an honest presidential candidate would not be afraid to say, “You know, patriotism is not a matter of wearing a flag in your lapel, not a matter of this or not—patriotism is not supporting the government. Patriotism is supporting the principles that the government is supposed to stand for.” You know, so we need to redefine these things which we have come—which have been thrown at us and which we’ve imbibed without thinking, not thinking, “Oh, what really is patriotism?” If we start really thinking about what it is, then we will reject these cries that you’re not patriotic, and we’ll say, “Patriotism is not supporting the government.” When the government does bad things, the most patriotic thing you can do is to criticize the government, because that’s the Declaration of Independence. That’s our basic democratic charter. The Declaration of Independence says governments are set up by the people to—they’re artificial creations. They’re set up to ensure certain rights, the equal right to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. So when governments become destructive of those ends, the Declaration said, “it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish” the

government. That's our basic democratic charter. People have forgotten what it is. It's OK to alter or abolish the government when the government violates its trust. And then you are being patriotic. I mean, the government violates its trust, the government is being unpatriotic.

Yeah, so we have to think about these words and phrases that are thrown at us without giving us a time to think. And, you know, we have to redefine these words, like "national security." What is national security? Lawyers say, "Well, this is for national security." Well, that takes care of it. No, it doesn't take care of it. This national security means different things to different people. Ah, there's some people—for some people, national security means having military bases all over the world. For other people, national security means having healthcare, having jobs. You know, that's security. And so, yeah, we need to sort of redefine these things.

We need to redefine "terrorism." Otherwise, the government can throw these words at us: "Oh, we're fighting against terrorism." Oh, well, then I guess we have to do this. Wait a while, what do you mean by "terrorism"? Well, we sort of have an idea what terrorism means. Terrorism means that you kill innocent people for some belief that you have. Yeah, you know, sure, blowing up on 9/11, yeah, that was terrorist. But if that's the definition of "terrorism," killing innocent people for some belief you have, then war is terrorism.

AMY GOODMAN: Howard Zinn, the legendary historian, author of *A People's History of the United States* and much more, he was speaking at Binghamton University. If you'd like a copy of today's broadcast, you can go to our website at democracynow.org. We'll come back to the conclusion of his address in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return to historian Howard Zinn's first speech after the 2008 election. The author of *A People's History of the United States* discusses the election, war, peace, and what this country symbolizes to the rest of the world.

HOWARD ZINN: We have to stop thinking that solutions to problems are military solutions, that you can solve problems with violence. You can't really. You don't really solve problems with violence. We have to change our definitions of "heroism." Heroism in American culture, so far, really—when people think of heroism, they think of military heroes. They think of the people whose statues are all over the country, you know, and they think of medals and battles. And yeah, these are military heroes. And that's why Obama goes along with that definition of military—of "hero," by referring to John McCain, you know, as a military hero, always feeling that he must do that. I never felt he must do that. John McCain, to my mind—and I know that this is a tough thing to accept and may make some of the people angry—John McCain was tortured and bore up under torture and was a victim of torture and imprisonment, and, you know, it takes fortitude to

that. He's not a military hero. Before he was imprisoned, he dropped bombs on innocent people. You know, he—yeah, he did what the other members of the Air Force did. They dropped bombs on peasant villages and killed a lot of innocent people. I don't consider that heroism. So, we have to redefine. To me, the great heroes are the people who have spoken out against war. Those are the heroes, you know.

And so, well, I think—yeah, I think we have to change, change our mindset. We have to understand certain things that we haven't maybe thought about enough. I think one of the things we haven't thought about enough—because this is basic, and this is crucial—we haven't realized, or at least not expressed it consciously, that the government's interests are not the same as our interests. Really. And so, when they talk about the national interest, they're creating what Kurt Vonnegut used to call a “granfalloon.” A granfalloon was, so, a meaningless abstraction and when you put together that don't belong together, you see a “national security”—no—and “national interest.” No, there's no one national interest. There's the interest of the president of the United States, and then there's the interest of the young person he sends to war. They're different interests, you see? There is the interest of Exxon and Halliburton, and there's the interest of the worker, the nurse's aide, the teacher, the factory worker. Those are different interests. Once you recognize that you and the government have different interests, that's a very important step forward in your thinking, because if you think you have a common interest with the government, well, then it means that if the government says you must do this and you must do that, and it's a good idea to go to war here, well, the government is looking out for my interest. No, the government is not looking out for your interest. The government has its own interests, and they're not the interests of the people. Not just true in the United States, it's true everywhere in the world. Governments generally do not represent the interests of their people. See? That's why governments keep getting overthrown, because people at a certain point realize, “Hey! No, the government is not serving my interest.”

That's also why governments lie. Why do governments lie? You must know that governments lie—not just our government; governments, in general, lie. Why do they lie? They have to lie, because their interests are different than the interests of ordinary people. If they told the truth, they would be out of office. So you have to recognize, you know, that the difference, difference in interest.

And the—well, I have to say something about war, a little more than I have said, and what I say about them, because I've been emphasizing the importance of renouncing war and not being a war-making nation, and because it will not be enough to get us out of Iraq. One of these days, we'll get out of Iraq. We have to get out of Iraq. We don't belong there. And we're going to have to get out of there. Sooner or later, we're going to have to get out of there. But we don't want to have to—we don't want to get out of Iraq and then have to get out of somewhere else. We don't have to get out of Iraq but keep troops in Afghanistan, as unfortunately, you know, Obama said, troops in Afghanistan. No, no more—not just Iraq. We have to get into a mindset about renouncing war, period, and which is a big step.

And my ideas about war, my thoughts about war, the sort of the conclusions that I've come to about war, they really come from two sources. One, from my study of history. Of course, not everybody who studies history comes to the same conclusions. But, you know, you have to listen to various people who study history and decide what makes more sense, right? I've looked at various histories. I've concluded that my history makes more sense. And I've always been an objective student of these things, yes. But my—yeah, my ideas about war come from two sources. One of them is studying history, the history of wars, the history of governments, the history of empires. That history helps a lot in straightening out your thinking.

And the other is my own experience in war. You know, I was in World War II. I was a Air Force bombardier. I dropped bombs on various cities in Europe. That doesn't make me an expert. Lots of people were in wars, and they all come out with different opinions. Well, so all I can do is give you my opinion based on my thinking after having been in a war. I was an enthusiastic enlistee in the Air Force. I wanted to be in the war, war against fascism, the “good war,” right? But at the end of the war, as I looked around and surveyed the world and thought about what I had done and thought about—and learned about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and learned about Dresden and learned about Hamburg and learned things I didn't even realize while I was bombing, because when you're involved in a military operation, you don't think. You just—you're an automaton, really. You may be a well-educated and technically competent automaton, but that's what you—you aren't really—you're not questioning, not questioning why. “Why are they sending me to bomb this little town? When the war is almost over, there's no reason for dropping bombs on several thousand people.” No, you don't think.

Well, I began to think after the war and began to think that—and I was thinking now about the good war, the best war, and I was thinking, “Oh.” And then I began to see, no, this good war is not simply good. This best of wars, no. And if that's true of this war, imagine what is true of all the other obviously ugly wars about which you can't even use the word “good.”

So, yeah, and I began to realize certain things, that war corrupts everybody, corrupts everybody who engages in it. You start off, they're the bad guys. You make an interesting psychological jump. The jump is this: since they're the bad guys, you must be the good guys. No, they may very well be the bad guys. They may be fascists and dictators and bad, really bad guys. That doesn't mean you're good, you know? And when I began to look at it that way, I realized that wars are fought by evils on both sides. You know, one is a little more evil than the other. But even though you start in a war with sort of good intentions—we're going to defeat fascism, we're going to do this—you end up being corrupted, you end up being violent, you end up killing a lot of innocent people, because you've decided from the beginning that you're right, and then you don't have to ask questions anymore. That's an interesting psychological thing that you—trick that you play. Well, you start out—you make a decision at the very beginning. The decision is: they're wrong, I'm right. Once you have made that decision, you don't have to think anymore. Then anything you do goes. Anything you do is OK, because you made the decision early on that they're bad, you're good. Then you can kill several hundred

thousand people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then you can kill 100,000 people in Dresden. It doesn't matter. You're not thinking about it. Yeah, war corrupts everybody who engages in it.

So what else can I say about war? Lots of things. But I took out my watch presumably because I care. And I don't. But I—you know, people will present you with humanitarian awards. Oh, this is for a good cause. The thing about war is the outcome is unpredictable. The immediate thing you do is predictable. The immediate thing you do is horrible, because war is horrible. And if somebody promises you that, "Well, this is horrible, like we have to bomb these hundreds of thousands of people in Japan. This is horrible, but it's leading to a good thing," truth is, you never know what this is leading to. You never know the outcome. You never know what the future is. You know that the present is evil, and you're asked to commit this evil for some possible future good. Doesn't make sense, especially since if you look at the history of wars, you find out that those so-called future goods don't materialize. You know, the future good of World War II was, "Oh, now we're rid of fascism. Now we're going to have a good world, a peaceful world. Now the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 50 million people died in World War II, but now it's going to be OK." Well, you've lived these years since World War II. Has it been OK? Can you say that those 50 million lives were—yeah, it had to be done because—because of what? No, the wars—violence in general is a quick fix. It may give you a feeling that you've accomplished something, but it's unpredictable in its ends. And because it's corrupting, the ends are usually bad.

So, OK, I won't say anything more about war. And, you know, of course, it wastes people. It wastes wealth. It's an enormous, enormous waste.

And so, what is there to do? We need to educate ourselves and other people. We need to educate ourselves in history. History is very important. That's why I went into a little history, because, you know, if you don't know history, it's as if you were born yesterday. If you were born yesterday, then any leader can tell you anything, you have no way of checking up on it. History is very important. I don't mean formal history, what you learn in a classroom. No, history, if you're learning, go to the library. Go—yeah, go to the library and read, read, learn, learn history. Yeah, so we have an educational job to do with history.

We have an educational job to do about our relationship to government, you know, and to realize that disobedience is essential to democracy, you see. And it's important to understand democracy is not the three branches of government. It's not what they told us in junior high school. "Oh, this is democracy. We have three branches of government, kiddos, the legislative, the executive, judicial. We have checks and balances that balance one another out. If somebody does something bad, it will be checked by"—wow! What a neat system! Nothing can go wrong. Well, now, those structures are not democracy. Democracy is the people. Democracy is social movements. That's what democracy is. And what history tells us is that when injustices have been remedied, they have not been remedied by the three branches of government. They've been remedied by great social

movements, which then push and force and pressure and threaten the three branches of government until they finally do something. Really, that's democracy.

And no, we mustn't be pessimistic. We mustn't be cynical. We mustn't think we're powerless. We're not powerless. That's where history comes in. If you look at history, you see people felt powerless and felt powerless and felt powerless, until they organized, and they got together, and they persisted, and they didn't give up, and they built social movements. Whether it was the anti-slavery movement or the black movement of the 1960s or the antiwar movement in Vietnam or the women's movement, they started small and apparently helpless; they became powerful enough to have an effect on the nation and on national policy. We're not powerless. We just have to be persistent and patient, not patient in the passive sense, but patient in the active sense of having a kind of faith that if all of us do little things—well, if all of us do little things, at some point there will be a critical mass created. Those little things will add up. That's what has happened historically. People were disconsolate, and people thought they couldn't end, but they kept doing, doing, doing, and then something important happened.

And I'll leave you with just one more thought, that if you do that, if you join some group, if you join whatever the group is, a group that's working on, you know, gender equality or racism or immigrant rights or the environment or the war, whatever group you join or whatever little action you take, you know, it will make you feel better. It will make you feel better. And I'm not saying we should do all these things just to make ourselves feel better, but it's good to know that life becomes more interesting and rewarding when you become involved with other people in some great social cause. Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: Legendary historian Howard Zinn, speaking at Binghamton University, Upstate New York, just after the election, on November 8th. Howard Zinn is author of, among many other books, *A People's History of the United States*.