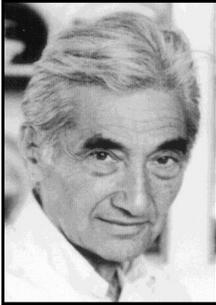


The Greatest Generation

By Howard Zinn,

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They tell me I am a member of the greatest generation. That's because I saw combat duty as a bombardier in World War II, and we (I almost said "I") won the war against fascism. I am told this by Tom Brokaw, who wrote a book called *The Greatest Generation*, which is all about us. He is an anchorman for a big television network, meaning that he is anchored to orthodoxy, and there is no greater orthodoxy than to ascribe greatness to military valor.

That idea is perpetuated by an artillery barrage of books and films about World War II: Pearl Harbor, Saving Private Ryan, and the HBO multi-episode story of the 101st Airborne, Band of Brothers, based on Stephen Ambrose's book of the same name. And Ambrose has just published an exciting history of the valiant "men and boys" who flew B-24s.

The crews who flew those planes died in great numbers. We who flew the more graceful-looking B-17s sardonically called those other planes Bdash2crash4. I wrote from my air base in England to my friend Joe Perry, who was flying B-24s out of Italy, kidding him about his big clunk of a plane, but the humor was extinguished when my last letter to him came back with the notation "Deceased."

Those who saw combat in World War II, whether they lived or died, are celebrated as heroes. But it seems clear that the degree of heroism attributed to soldiers varies according to the moral reputation of the war. The fighters of World War II share a special glory because that war has always been considered a "good war," more easily justified (except by those who refuse to justify any war) than the wars our nation waged against Vietnam or Korea or Iraq or Panama or Grenada. And so they are "the greatest generation."

What makes them so great? These men--the sailors of Pearl Harbor, the soldiers of the D-Day invasion, the crews of the bombers and fighters--risked their lives in war, perhaps because they believed the war was just, perhaps because they wanted to save a friend, perhaps because they had some vague idea they were doing this "for my country." And even if I believe that there is no such thing as a just war, even if I think that men do not fight for "our country" but for those who run our country, the sacrifice of soldiers who believe, even wrongly, that they are fighting for a good cause is to be acknowledged. But not admired.

I refuse to celebrate them as "the greatest generation" because in doing so we are celebrating courage and sacrifice in the cause of war. And we are miseducating the young to believe that military heroism is the noblest form of heroism, when it should be remembered only as the tragic accompaniment of horrendous policies driven by power and profit. Indeed, the current infatuation with World War II prepares us--innocently on the part of some, deliberately on the part of others--for more war, more military adventures, more attempts to emulate

the military heroes of the past.

To decide which is "the greatest generation" involves a double choice. One is the choice of a particular time period. The other is the choice of who will represent that time period, that generation. Neither is decided arbitrarily, but rather on the basis of one's political philosophy. So there is an ideological purpose in choosing the generation of World War II, and then in choosing the warriors of that time to represent "greatness."

I would propose other choices if we are to educate the young people of our time in the values of peace and justice.

We might take the generation of the American Revolution, another generation almost universally considered "great." I would not choose the Founding Fathers to represent it. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, Madison have had enough adulation, and their biographies clog the book review sections of the major media.

The Founding Fathers did lead the war for independence from Britain. But they did not do it for the equal right of all to life, liberty, and equality. Their intention was to set up a new government that would protect the property of slave owners, land speculators, merchants, and bondholders.

Independence from England had already been secured in parts of the country by grassroots rebellion a year before the battles at Lexington and Concord that initiated hostilities with Britain. (See Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution*, New Press, 2001.) It is one of the phenomena of modern times that revolutions are not favored unless they are led by people who are not revolutionaries at heart.

I would rather recognize the greatness of all those who fought to make sure that the Founding Fathers would not betray the principles of the Declaration of Independence, to make sure that the dead and maimed of the Revolutionary War did not make their sacrifices in vain. And so I would honor the soldiers of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey lines, who mutinied against George Washington and Mad Anthony Wayne. They were rebelling against the luxurious treatment of their gentry officers, and their own mistreatment: 500 lashes for misconduct, Washington decreed, and execute a few mutinous leaders to set an example.

Add to the honors list in that great generation the farmers of western Massachusetts who resisted the taking of their homes and land for nonpayment of exorbitant taxes. This was the Shays Rebellion, which put a fright into the Founding Fathers, especially as it led to uprisings in Maryland, South Carolina, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. That rebellion persuaded the Founding Fathers that a strong central government was needed to maintain law and order against unruly dissidents, slave rebels, and Indians. These were the true revolutionaries of the Revolutionary generation.

I submit as additional candidates for "the greatest generation" those Americans who, in the decades before the Civil War, struggled against the takeover of Indian and Mexican lands. These were the Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes, and especially the Seminoles, who resisted their removal from Florida in eight years of guerrilla warfare, succumbing finally to a combination of deception and superior force.

And the dissidents of the Mexican War: Seven regiments deserted on the way to Mexico City. And the Massachusetts volunteers--that half of them who survived--who booed their commanding officer at a reception after the war ended.

And what of the abolitionist generation--the leaders of slave revolts, the conductors of the underground railroad, the speakers and writers, the likes of David Walker and Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass? It was they who gave honor to the decades leading up to the Civil War, they who pressured Lincoln and the Congress into ending slavery.

Why do we use the term "greatest generation" for participants in war? Why not for those who have opposed war, who have tried to make us understand that war has never solved fundamental problems?

Should we not honor, instead of parachutists and bomber pilots, those conscientious objectors who refused to fight or the radicals and pacifists who opposed the idea that young people of one nation should kill young people of another nation to serve the purposes of politicians and financiers?

The generation of the First World War was not made honorable by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, by General Pershing and Admiral Dewey. What nobility it had came from the courage of Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Kate Richard O'Hare, and the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World, all of whom were imprisoned for opposing the entrance of the United States into the slaughterhouse of Europe.

If there is to be a label "the greatest generation," let us consider attaching it also to the men and women of the sixties: the black people who changed the South and educated the nation, the civilians and soldiers who opposed the war in Vietnam, the women who put sexual equality on the national agenda, the homosexuals who declared their humanity in defiance of deep prejudices, the disabled people who insisted that the government recognize the discrimination against them.

And I suggest that some future writer--not an anchorman, but someone unmoored from traditional ways of thinking--may, if the rebels of Seattle and Genoa persist and grow, recognize the greatness of this generation, the first of the new century, for launching a world movement against corporate domination, for asserting human rights against guns and greed.

This essay was written as a response to the book, *The Greatest Generation* by the famous news anchor Tom Brokaw. Brokaw lauds the principles of the men who fought on the battlefield, such as Zinn, and the citizens who sacrificed on the home front during this most violent of all confrontations.

