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

A [First Run Features](#) release of a Moving Train production. Produced, directed by Deb Ellis, Denis Mueller.

By [EDDIE COCKRELL](#)

As engaging and stimulating as the man himself, "**Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train**" provides a brisk, warm profile of the historian and activist. Pic, infinitely less strident than "*Fahrenheit 9/11*," is a natural and well-timed follow-up to that film for long-time fans of the educator and the newly-mobilized alike. Currently in limited northeast release, skedded for a July 23 New York opening and a September rollout in Los Angeles and the Pacific northwest, pic is positioned to ride pre-election coattails to strong regional showings in advance of vigorous tube and ancillary life.

Articulate and avuncular, **Zinn** comes across as the Jimmy Stewart of the Left. At 81, influential author of the perennial "A People's History of the United States," has walked it like he's talked it: He organized shipyard workers in the 1930s, forged his experience as a World War II bombardier into a steely resistance to armed conflict, helped lead the charge during the 1950s civil rights movement and worked with the North Vietnamese to free captured pilots during that war.

Pic explores these and other episodes in his life, with talking heads Alice Walker, Daniel Ellsberg, Marian Wright Edelman, Tom Hayden, Noah Chomsky and **Zinn** himself providing perspective on a life committed to progressive change and the forces within and without that impede it. Themes tying together history and **Zinn's** own moral code are amplified with passages from his writings, read in measured tones by thesp [Matt Damon](#).

Of the many ideas that resonate in light of current events, one fairly leaps off the screen: "The best way to make sure that a country turns to communism," he said of Vietnam, "is to put foreign military forces in it. Because then, the communists will have a nationalist cause which they can use against the foreign power."

Tech credits are crisp, with shrewdly-placed archival footage seamlessly linking disparate original material. Richard Martinez' original score is emotional yet occasionally intrusive, though good use is made of tunes by Billy Bragg, Woody Guthrie and Pearl Jam -- latter unmentioned in the credits but repped by "Down," a song dedicated to **Zinn** on their recent collection of b-sides and rarities. Title comes from author's 2002 book, itself named after his advice to students.

Camera (color/B&W, 16mm), Ellis, Mueller; editor, Cyndi Moran; music, Richard Martinez; sound, Ellis, Mueller. Reviewed on videocassette, Wheaton, Md., June 27, 2004. (In Vermont, Provincetown film festivals.) Running time: 78 MIN. Narrator: Matt Damon.