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The People's Historian

By [JOHN BROWN](#) | [IDS](#)

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I don't know what happened at the Battle of Gettysburg.

It was never covered in my advanced placement U.S. History class. We didn't take a bus trip to the battlefield or memorize anything that begins "Four score and seven years ago."

But we did learn that Lincoln didn't fight the Civil War to free slaves.

My sister, a seventh grader, recently complained that American history is "War, war, war. All we do is wars."

My history class skipped wars. Well, not quite. My teacher's version of World War II was, "There was a war, and the Allies won."

Instead of wars, we studied the Palmer raids, the Pullman strike and poll taxes. We learned about the systematic removal of Native Americans under pretense of paternalism through a series of broken treaties.

In short, we learned a history seventh graders rarely do.

The reasons? A teacher who jokingly calls William Henry Harrison his favorite president because he did the least damage in his month in office.

But more importantly, our textbook wasn't an optimistic fable. We never touched "Land of Promise" or "The American Pageant."

We read "A People's History of the United States," written by Howard Zinn, who died last Wednesday at age 87.

I'm not here to write an obituary but an account of how he changed the way one group of students thought about history.

The sorrow was evident among my former classmates, who memorialized him in Facebook statuses.

After all, "A People's History" first taught us to question the stories we tell ourselves.

Zinn showed us that our founding fathers were not demigods of the Enlightenment who crafted a perfectly balanced government, which progresses inevitably toward democratic utopia. He told the story through the lens of the losers, the downtrodden and conquered.

Or as one classmate, Zahed Haseeb, put it: "Zinn helped us realize there's almost always more to a story."

Critics often attempted to neutralize Zinn by labeling him a radical and not a serious historian.

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But Zinn never pretended to be fair and balanced. After all, his memoir is titled "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train."

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By being so constantly contrarian, Zinn forced us to question even his own history. He was as selective as the storybook texts he overturned but for that he never apologized.

After reading Zinn, much of my class became cynical.

His narrative of slaveholding presidents, imperialist wars, Native American genocide, disenfranchised women and the violent oppression of workers wore heavy on our hearts, the hearts that we had so many times pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.

Zinn constantly reminded us, though, that the heroes of the American story are the nameless, ordinary people who fought for freedom not under the Capitol dome but on the picket lines.

Howard Zinn remained hopeful that change would come, "From the bottom up, from the people themselves."

And in times like these, shouldn't we stake hope not in one man but in all the people.

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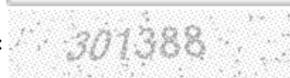
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4. Posted by AntiNeoFascist at 4:13 PM on Feb 02, 2010 | Report this comment

Revisionist History at its finest. Reading Zinn's histories are similar to reading the Wolf's side of the 3 Little Pigs story (<http://www.shol.com/agita/wolfside.htm>) All of the people in his "stories" are gross caricatures; evil and corrupt or good and angelic depending on if they conformed to his worldview. At what point do we stop considering these "tales" worthy of being called history? Moral : Tell a good story and those who don't know any better will fall in line to defend it, true, right or ridiculously wrong.

3. Posted by Piss on Zinn at 12:13 PM on Feb 02, 2010 | Report this comment

The disgust that Zinn plainly felt for America stood in sharp contrast to his more benign view of the most notorious Communist dictatorships of the 20th century. For example, Maoist China was, in the professor's estimation, "the closest thing, in the long history of that ancient country, to a people's government, independent of outside control." Castro's Cuba, similarly, "had no bloody record of suppression," according to Zinn. And the Marxist Sandinista dictators of Nicaragua in the 1980s were allegedly "welcomed" by the people of that country, while the opposition Contras – who were supported by the United States, and whose presidential candidate emerged victorious when a free election was held – were described by Zinn as a "terrorist group" that "seemed to have no popular support inside Nicaragua." During the Cold War, Zinn supported the Soviet Union in its rivalry against the United States. And in a pamphlet titled Terrorism and War, which he penned after 9/11, Zinn depicted America as a veritable terrorist state, while painting its jihadist enemies as freedom fighters who were bravely defending themselves against the ravages of U.S.

imperialism. In short, Zinn was a Marxist scumbag. Piss be upon him.

2. Posted by J at 11:46 AM on Feb 02, 2010 | Report this comment

Civic education and legitimate historical learning are close to dead in American public schools. In my school, we spent years learning about the civil rights movement but barely covered the Constitution. We learned about the plight of Native Americans and factory workers but not about revolutions in communications and transportation. In terms of World War II, we got an education on the Holocaust and not much else--not the Japanese genocides, and not the battles that killed 65 million other people. Many of my classmates thought the war happened in the early '30s and had no idea we fought, say, the Italians. All the things we learned--about the oppression of the little guy--are important. But taken to excess, they provide a poor reflection of the big picture.

1. Posted by RC at 8:26 AM on Feb 02, 2010 | Report this comment

Sounds like your teacher was an arse. As for the people on the picket line, they fought for an "Honest Days Wages for an Honest Day Work." Sadly, the people thta followed in their footsteps have f-ed it up just like the government that has followed in the footsteps of our founding fathers.

MULTIMEDIA »



IU 58, Minnesota 81

Olympics, Feb. 20, 2010

IU Sing 2010: Pop



Olympics, Feb. 19, 2010

BLOOMINGTON WEATHER »

CONDITIONS: Light Rain
TEMPERATURE: 43.0 F (6.1 C)
HUMIDITY: 60 %



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