

Voices of a People's History of the United States

By Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove
New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004

Reviewed by Andrea S. Libresco

I was given a copy of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* not long after I graduated from college, almost 25 years ago. Since I had been a history major, I was pretty surprised to be reading about many of the people and movements in the volume for the first time. After I got over feeling both ignorant and foolish, I became angry. Why hadn't I come across these historical actors or their actions in the course of my studies? Why did I know of Martin Luther King Jr., but not of Fannie Lou Hamer? Why Frederick Douglass but not Angelina Grimke? Why was I conversant with the Triangle Fire but not with the Wobblies or the Lawrence Strike? And why did I know that Helen Keller was blind and deaf, but not that she was a socialist? These questions, and the knowledge I garnered from the book, gave direction to my post-college studies as I returned to the classroom, this time as a teacher. Yet, I spent the decades since Zinn's book came out wishing that he had published a companion volume with all of the documents to which he alluded in the history book.

This is that document book. Its purpose is the same as that of the original work, *A People's History*; that is, to give voice to those left out of mainstream history books, the nonwhite, the non-powerful, the non-wealthy, the non-male. Thus, instead of one history,

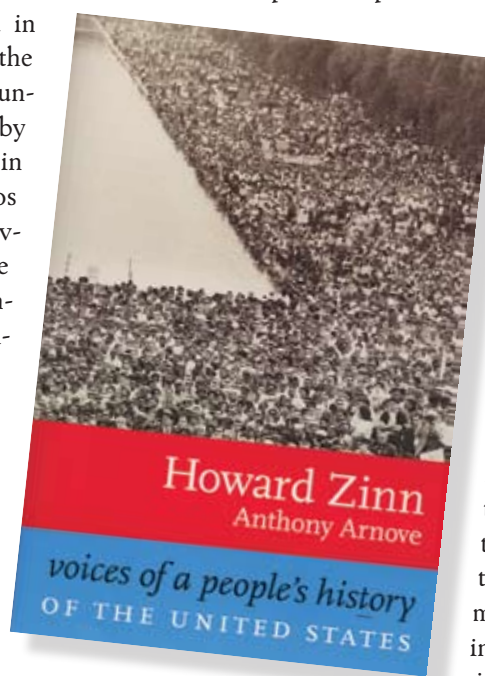
there are multiple stories told—stories told from different perspectives than we are accustomed to hearing. Zinn is committed to “[telling] the story of the nation’s wars from the point of view of the enemy: the viewpoint of the Mexicans who were invaded in the Mexican War, the Cubans whose country was taken over by the United States in 1898, the Filipinos who suffered a devastating aggressive war at the beginning of the twentieth century.” (26) On the domestic side, Zinn brings to light the stories of “the hidden resistance of the people against the power of the establishment: the refusal of Native Americans to simply die and disappear; the rebellion of black people in the anti-slavery movement and in the more recent movement against racial segregation; the strikes carried out by working people to improve their lives.” (28) However, letting these voices be heard is not the end in itself; rather, Zinn’s goal is for the students

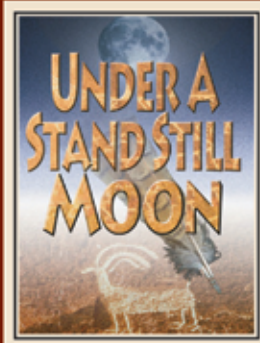
who hear these activist voices in the documents book to reject the notion of a passive citizenry “always waiting for some savior on high—God or the next president—to bring peace and justice.” (24) They will know their own potential power because they will now

know the history of the power of the people to bring about change, and they will hear that history told in the voices of the people themselves.

It is clear that Zinn and coauthor Anthony Arnove intend these stories of historical activists and their social action movements to be instructive for our civic behavior today.

Zinn’s current news pieces arguing for political action in opposition to the Bush administration reference earlier social activists like abolitionists, Freedom Riders, and protesters against the war in Vietnam. On the occasion of President Bush’s second inauguration, Zinn noted in a news magazine piece the discord





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-Sue Harrison, prize winning author *Call Down the Stars*.

"A great book for kids and adults who want to know more about the daily lives of the people who lived in one of the great archaeological sites of the United States."
-Steven A. LeBlanc, Archaeologist, Harvard Peabody Museum.

"This is a valuable teaching tool for history, culture studies, family studies, as well as Native American studies. It would serve as an excellent collaborative text between the social sciences and language arts."
-James Burch, Weston, CT Middle School, Social Studies.

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by Ann Howard Creel

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between front-page headlines quoting Bush on the spread of liberty versus the two-days-earlier photo of a little Iraqi girl covered in blood, having just lost her parents. Though the majority of Americans watching the inaugural coverage on television probably missed the photo of the Iraqi girl, Zinn remained optimistic that "even those who have been brought up to believe in the beneficence of our nation ... can rethink their beliefs when presented with the facts."¹ He hearkens back to history for support, noting that the reality of slavery and its cruelty, as well as the heroism of its resisters, moved the American public over time to change that system; just as, 100 years later, images of civil rights activists resisting oppression profoundly impacted Americans; and, just as images of the My Lai massacre and of the young Vietnamese girl running naked down the road, her skin shredded by napalm, made it impossible for the majority of Americans to believe President Johnson's arguments for the Vietnam War. (Zinn 2005).

The point of learning history is to fight against collective amnesia; indeed, to remember the past is to avoid being a prisoner of the present, a prisoner of those who command the microphones and the media, those who claim exclusive access to the data. Thus, readers of *Voices* can use the data to tell a sitting president who speaks of going to war for democracy that other presidents have used that same rhetoric, and protesters of earlier wars have also questioned it.

Readers will find their ammunition for questioning the rationale for war and the truthfulness of their leaders throughout the selections in *Voices*; and it is impossible not to make the connections to voices of today. Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, an on-the-scene witness, challenges the politicians who supported the Mexican War in his diary in March 1846, "I have said from the first that the United States are the aggressors... We have no one particle of right to be here." (156) Mark Twain publicly repudiates the bloody invasion and occupation of the Philippines in 1899 (which Zinn reminds us in his pre-quote commentary that President Bush cited in 2003 as a model for the occupation of Iraq), "I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land." (248) Martin Luther King Jr. speaks out against the war in Vietnam with his 1967 Riverside Church sermon, "We must stop now ... I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed ... I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and dealt death and corruption in Vietnam." (425) Interestingly, with the inclusion of the more radical King selection (as opposed to the usual 1963 "I have a dream" choice), Zinn is saying that attention must be paid to class as a factor in American history. As James Loewen pointed out in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, his analysis of United States history texts, most of the books did not even have listings for class, social stratification, or any related topic.²

It is precisely because of these omissions in mainstream texts that Zinn's book is a desirable addition to any college, Advanced Placement, or heterogeneously grouped American history survey. Although many of the selections are a bit long, they are generally compelling; in any case, teachers can select both from and within the more than 200 documents for assignments. It's worth noting that 87 out of the 200-plus documents are from the modern era, World War II to the present, a welcomed decision, since too many texts and courses hurry through this time period. One would hope that this wealth of material, which includes excerpts from songs, poems, novels, autobiographies, speeches, eyewitness accounts, petitions, testimonies, and essays, might induce teachers to allot more time to recent history.

Some might question whether, in 2005, teachers need a documents book at all, given the increase of supplementary materials that accompany texts and the ready access to documents on the internet. While the documents that are packaged with textbooks are more inclusive than they were 20 years ago, they do not provide either the breadth or depth given by this collection. As for internet access, a teacher who already knows of all of these voices could very well seek them out on the internet; however, Zinn has already done this work for us and put together those voices we might not even have known to look and listen for. How many teachers would find Angelina Grimke Weld's 1838 impassioned anti-slavery address delivered at Pennsylvania Hall while thousands protested outside? This remarkable Southern woman testified to the abomination of slavery, "I have seen it—I have seen it. I know it has horrors that can never be described." (118) And how many would find the 1844 letter from Henry Bibb, who was born a slave to a Kentucky state senator and who won his freedom in 1841? He wrote his former master from Canada, "If you should ever chance to be traveling this way, and

will call on me, I will use you better than you did me while you held me as a slave." (181)

The document book is accompanied by an online teaching guide that can be downloaded from the publisher's website, www.sevenstories.com/textbook/. The guide was created by Gayle Olson-Raymer at Humboldt State University with selected chapters written by Humboldt County Advanced Placement teachers. Its chapters mirror the chapters in *Voices* which, in turn, mirrors the organization of *A People's History*.³ Each chapter includes analytical questions for each of the documents, main points of the chapter of *Voices* as well as of *A People's History*, discussion questions for classroom conversations (again for both *Voices* and *A People's History*), suggested assignments, suggested essay questions, and simulations and other creative approaches. The teaching guide recommends, correctly, that *Voices* be a vehicle for thematic teaching; to this end, the guide pulls what it deems to be the five most important themes for a year-long American history class: (1) History matters because the past tells us a great deal about the present and future (reminiscent of the Orwell quote, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."); (2) No telling of history is neutral or objective, thus history is really about making people think, ask questions, and demand answers; (3) History is usually told from the standpoint of the victors; (4) Ordinary people make history (and as Zinn pointed out in a *Boston Globe* interview, "More important than who sits in the White House is who sits outside it"⁴); and (5) Injustices are remedied when ordinary people speak up, organize, and protest. This last theme is the principle by which Zinn has lived his life. His autobiography, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, ends with the argument that "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only

of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. ... And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. ... The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."⁵ (208)

Zinn has certainly written this book to get all who read it to think more about fundamental change. Perhaps one of the pieces that best captures this spirit is an excerpt from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* where Tom Joad promises, "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there... An' when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise, and livin' in the houses they build—I'll be there, too" (349). Tom Joad is in this fight for justice for the long haul. Howard Zinn has devoted his life to that fight and, with this book, he adds to the arsenal teachers and students can use to tell the people's stories and continue the fight. He'll be there, too. 🌐

Notes

1. Howard Zinn, "Changing Minds, One at a Time," *The Progressive*. (March 2005).
2. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Text Got Wrong*. N.Y.: The New Press, 1995.
3. Howard Zinn, (2000). *A People's History of the United States*. N.Y.: Harper Collins.
4. Joshua Glenn, "The People's Historian: Questions for Howard Zinn," *The Boston Globe*. (November 14, 2004).
5. Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Andrea S. Libresco is special assistant professor of social studies in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hofstra University and was named Hofstra University Distinguished Teacher of 2005. She has also taught secondary and elementary social studies on Long Island. She can be reached at catasl@hofstra.edu.