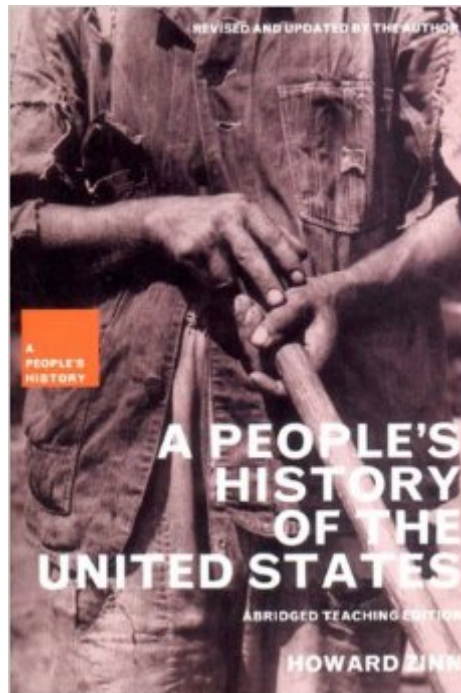


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# A People's History Of The United States: Abridged Teaching Edition (New Press People's History)



## Synopsis

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* has turned history on its head for an entire generation of readers, telling the nation's story from the viewpoints of ordinary people—the slaves, workers, immigrants, women, and Native Americans who made their own history but whose voices are typically omitted from the historical record. The New Press's Abridged Teaching Edition of *A People's History of the United States* has made Zinn's original text available specifically for classroom use, with a wide range of tools for students to begin a critical inquiry into the American past. The teaching edition includes exercises and teaching materials to accompany each chapter.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

For several years of the last decade, I taught Advanced Placement U.S. History at a high school in northern Virginia. When I began the course, Zinn had already been assigned by my predecessor, and I needed a counterpoint to the main text (Bailey and Kennedy's bombastic, traditionalist, and short-on-social history "Pageant of the American Nation"). Zinn's deftly written book provided a fortunate antithesis to the "march of presidents and industrial titans" approach to American history. I found many chapters of this book to be such excellent stimulants to class discussions that I extended their use into my non-AP U.S. history classes, where students, many of whom could not otherwise have cared less about history, found themselves reading an interesting and provocative historian for the first time in their lives. Many of the best discussions I ever had with my classes

(both AP and "regular") began with assigned chapters from Zinn. From there, it was an easy step to move on to the idea of historiography (the history of how history has been interpreted) and to decoupling my students from thinking of the textbook as revealed wisdom. Yes, this book has its faults, as many of the previous reviews point out. It is very left-leaning. It does sometimes omit factual points that do not support its line of argument. It does sometimes verge on equating the misdeeds of American leaders with the horrific malevolence of the leaders of totalitarian states. It does romanticize its heroes. For all that, though, this book is an excellent introduction to U.S. history if read as a contrasting voice to more traditional narratives. It is a fine and vigorous antidote to the excessively reverent tone of many high school textbooks. It conveys a sense of moral passion that is often lacking in these texts, which are typically take great pains to offend no one, particularly regarding events within living memory. Not all contemporary texts are this bloodlessly terrible, but many are. One of the best things about Zinn's histories is that he leaves in the drama that the standard texts insist on draining out. "A People's History" begins with a bold thesis, and keeps it at center stage--namely, that those with power and wealth consistently extend it to others only when the situation has reached the level of deep crisis, and only with the minimum and uppermost fraction of the discontented needed to co-opt them and defeat the dissent of the remainder, often also turning otherwise natural allies into antagonistic contenders for "table scraps" from the banquet in the process. And as Zinn argues repeatedly, this grudging and incomplete inclusion, made reality by the courage and convictions of average men and women, has been the engine that has driven most if not all extensions of both liberty and equality in U.S. history, and that this is a continuing and unfinished process, awaiting future generations of idealists possessing the courage of their own convictions. I admire this book (and this author) for inculcating this idea among young readers. For young adults who have an interest in U.S. history, or for parents who wish to engage their teen's interest in history, this book is a great place to start. It also might be the start of a few conversations at home about justice, fairness, equality, morality, the probity of leaders, etc. Since it argues more from a passion for justice and equality, a sense of burning indignation, and a highly debatable point of view, those desiring balance should pair it with something less withering in its assessment toward the history of the American state. This is an excellent history for the newly interested, or for those readers looking for an alternative perspective.

While there is no doubt that Mr. Zinn is a communist at heart, there is also no doubt that Zinn's view and presentation is very entertaining not to mention pretty factual. Let us not fool ourselves here my friends, every writer who writes about politics or history is going to have a bias and that bias is going

to present itself in that author's work. I am a Republican, born again Christian and I had no problem with Zinn's views, simply because I am a realist. For years we were fed that nonsensical view of Christopher Columbus being a pious man coming to the Americas to bring salvation and religion to the indigenous people or simply just omitting the facts in American history studies that would show a very negative side of our founding fathers.(THIS IS NOT UNPATRIOTIC) I don't agree with everything Mr. Zinn has said in this book but it is refreshing to see history told more correctly so than in our public school system which are suppose to educate not indoctrinate. To my dear republican brethren out there, do not feel that you have to put our fore fathers on a pedestal in order for you to feel patriotic and zealous for your country. The reason I can be a conservative Republican and still agree with a lot of what Zinn has to say is (1. I do not allow a party to think for me, I always keep an open mind, without an open mind we are no different then the followers of David Koresh and other cultic fanatics. (2. We have come a long way in this great country of ours and have much to be proud of regardless of your race or back ground. Let us not view things as liberal or right wing, just be open minded and sift through the facts in different history books and find the truth somewhere in the middle.I recommend this book. 4 out of 5 stars (-1 star for the indoctrinating tone)

History is, in its way, a fiction.While it is made up of facts, things that are verifiable or at least reliably accepted as being what really happened, our understanding of history rests on a certain assumption that doesn't always hold up - that what we are reading or hearing is The Truth. It's how we learn about history when we're kids - that this happened and that happened, and that's all we really need to know.The problem, however, is that what we got in our history books wasn't the entire story. Oh, it was true, for a given value of "true," but the historian who wrote the book did so with a specific narrative in mind, one that fit his or her perception of the past and which - more importantly - would sell textbooks to hundreds of schools across the country. The history that we get from those books is designed to appeal to the sensibilities of a populace that is already inclined to think well of its nation, and rarely deviates from the theme. While they do try to note the excesses, injustices and impropriety of the past, they tend to bury it in the glorious achievements of governments and industry.Unfortunately, doing so means that there's a lot of history that gets left on the cutting room floor. Incidents, people, whole populations get brushed aside because either there's not enough room for them or because telling their story in detail ruins the mood that the historian is trying to set - usually one of bright optimism for a good and just nation.There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, either. An historian cannot practically include all of the historical viewpoints, good and bad, into a book meant to be used for only 180 days out of the year. So out of expedience, if not a

conscious desire to tell an uplifting tale, they write books that look upon our past as favorably as possible, while including just enough criticism of our failures to fend off any serious accusations of bias. As Zinn tells us, though, there's no such thing as an historian without bias. Every historian has a story to tell, and Zinn has decided that he doesn't want to tell the one we're all used to hearing. He starts in much the same place as most American history books - with the coming of Christopher Columbus to the New World. Immediately he reminds us that Columbus' mission was not one of exploration but of commerce, and that the first question he asked the natives of what he would label Hispanola was, "Where is your gold?" It all went downhill from there. Reading this book, it would be very easy to get depressed. I can see how those who were brought up with a healthy dose of American Exceptionalism (the idea that the United States obeys different rules from the rest of the world and, more importantly, cannot do wrong) would really dislike this book. It is page after page of lies, misdeeds, cruelty, greed and deception. It is the story a nation built not on the principle that all men are created equal, but that all men must be leashed to the yoke of the capitalist overclass. It's a tale of genocide and oppression, of revolts both peaceful and violent, and it never lets up for a moment. To his credit, Zinn tells us right up front that he's going to take the side of the oppressed, the dispossessed and the put-down, and there's no way you can tell that story without it being really depressing. It's pretty clear pretty quickly, though, where his sympathies lie: "My viewpoint, in telling the history of the United States, is different: that we must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners." His portrayal of the underclass, rebellious or not, is one of suffering nobility, and the System as a deliberately malevolent entity. Any good that it does is simply whatever was necessary to maintain its power, and the above quote speaks to that. The parallel structure that he uses effectively groups all of the upper class into the "persecutor" role, and the lower class into the "victims." And while there is some truth to that - human history, after all, is a long story of rich and powerful elites governing poor and powerless people - it is painting with too broad a brush, in my opinion. He seems to work from the premise that all those with power are bad, and so those without must therefore be good. As much as I wish that admitting bias was an excuse for it, it isn't. It does a disservice to all involved to flatten your view of the American class system into a two-dimensional shadow play. Not all of the populist agitators were good and noble people, nor were all politicians

cunning manipulators. Just keep that in mind as you read. It's a sobering read, though, to say the least. The best simile I could come up with is that it's like watching your parents have sex. It's something that you always suspected went on, but you could have gone your whole life without being presented with the reality of it. So it is no surprise that, after reading this book, some people become absolutely insufferable, cynical and disillusioned. If you've already gone through that stage of your political thinking, however, you find something else in this book - hope. It's something you have to dig for, but it is there, buried in the larger narrative that Zinn is telling us. Given the amount of detail he goes into, it's very easy to lose sight of the larger picture at work. Zinn details slave rebellions, gives stories of workers pushed to the extremes of human existence, soldiers thrown away for nothing, and entire segments of the population ignored or actively persecuted. But alongside these horror stories come tales of resistance. Whether it's the quiet contemplation by a poor white farmer over whether he might have more in common with his black neighbors than his white landlords, riots of prisoners and guards against a corrupt prison system, or the militant, city-wide shutdowns organized by the Wobblies, the people can only be pushed so far. And while the Powers That Be are very good at figuring out how to distract, scare or defy the people, they eventually do make changes for the better, and everyone benefits a little bit. Inasmuch as this book is a chronicle of America's misdeeds over the last few centuries, it is also a tale of Americans' triumphs. It is a tribute to the will of the people who, no matter how difficult it may have been, decided to stand up and demand respect from the men who held the reins of power. It is a testament to the women who wanted equality, the socialists who wanted a better world, the workers who wanted safe jobs at living wages, the blacks who wanted to be full citizens, and the Indians who wanted the wrongs of the past redressed. Not everybody has gotten what they wanted - America is still very much a work in progress, and there is bound to be some backsliding as we go. What Zinn shows in this book is that no matter how bad the American government can be how greedy American business might become, the American people want what's best for themselves and, when the time comes, will stand up and shout for it. Given enough time, and enough courage, The United States will continue to be a better and better nation, and perhaps someday - someday - it will finally fulfill our expectations for it.-----"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will...."- Frederick Douglass, 1857-----

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