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August 7, 2009

Zinn, Trimphalism, and Reflections on the American Revolution

"Were the Founding Fathers wise and just men trying to achieve a good, balance? In fact, they did not want a balance, except one which kept things as they were a balance among the dominant forces at that time. They certainly did not want an equal balance between slaves and masters, property less and property holders, Indians and whites."

A People's History of the United States, page 101.

A People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn has unquestionably impacted how students study American history. Zinn's alternative vision of the causes and ultimate value of the American Revolution can both inspire and infuriate adolescents and their teachers. Using Zinn's book can serve to advance a student's critical thinking skills, help her understand the importance of supporting statements with historic facts and documentation, and recognize the contributions and struggles of historically marginalized groups. However, only the most committed of radical revisionists would argue that A People's History of the United States should be employed as the sole historic source for high school students. For the high school history teacher, the task of balancing the various approaches to teaching the nation's founding has become increasingly more confusing.

While many American history textbooks have strived mightily in recent years to provide more print space and resources for the stories of African Americans, women and other minority groups, Zinn stresses the point that most high school texts still severely

shortchange the stories and achievements of these often forgotten Americans. After the French and Indian War, "Gary Nash's study of city tax lists shows that by the early 1770s, the top 5 percent of Boston's taxpayers controlled 49% of the city's taxable assets. In Philadelphia and New York too, wealth was more and more concentrated. Court-recorded wills showed that by 1750 the wealthiest people in the cities were leaving 20,000 pounds" (Zinn page 60). According to Zinn, the wealthy merchants and lawyers of these cities soon mobilized lower class anger against Britain's efforts to resolve their economic crisis through heavier taxation of the American colonists. This cynical, self serving action by Revolution heroes such as James Otis and John Hancock established a predictable pattern that would repeat itself often throughout American history: "the mobilization of lower-class energy by upper-class politicians, for their own purposes" (Zinn page 61). These stories rarely grace the pages of the American history textbooks.

In Chapter Five (*A Kind of Revolution*), Zinn relies heavily on A People Numerous and Armed, an analysis of George Washington's army by John Shy. The author provides mostly anecdotal evidence to show that, for the most part, poor and working class whites fought the war against the British Empire. In Zinn's world view, this represents further evidence of the manipulation of the have nots by the colonial elite.

In Boston during the Stamp Act crisis, working class rioters such as the shoemaker Ebenezer MacIntosh wreaked havoc and destroyed the mansion of Governor Thomas Hutchinson after being instigated by their affluent leaders. MacIntosh and friends "smashed up his house with axes, drank the wine in his wine cellar, and looted the house of its furniture and other objects" (Zinn page 61). According to Zinn, actions such

as these terrified the colonial elite who only wanted limited change and protest, not a wholesale societal transformation.

Can such a conspiratorial thesis be helpful in the high school history classroom? The answer is a very qualified yes. Generally, American history is taught as a survey. Over two hundred years of history must be covered in roughly nine months. For the teacher of United States History-Advanced Placement, the task is even more daunting. In the interest of time, certain eras of the nation's history must necessarily be cut or oversimplified. Therefore (despite the existence of subject matter standards and curriculum requirements), teachers often make their own decisions on just what to include in their lessons. If a teacher has approximately two to three weeks in which to teach the American Revolution and framing of the Constitution, it will be extremely difficult to study the story of Ebenezer MacIntosh with any detail.

However, the story of Mr. MacIntosh is important. In The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution, author Gary Nash points out that MacIntosh was a leader in Boston, the equal of Adams, Otis or Hancock. MacIntosh was the "Commander of the South End", the motherless child of an indigent father who exerted uncommon influence on the poor and working class of Boston in the 1760's (Nash page 188).

Therefore, Zinn's emphasis on historic characters such as MacIntosh and Daniel Shays has merit. Not only is MacIntosh important when discussing the colonial reaction to the Stamp Act but he's a compelling personality. MacIntosh was poor and uneducated and prone to violent behavior (he led his South End mob into battle on Pope's Day against a rival gang from the North End). A poor shoemaker who both wielded

significant power and terrified all those in official authority elicits as least as much interest from students as the story of James Otis.

For Zinn, MacIntosh is every bit as important and relevant as George Washington. While this contention is questionable, MacIntosh deserves mention in the context of the Revolutionary period. Zinn's book provides a relatively accessible reference guide for the teacher. By using selections from Chapter Four (*Tyranny is Tyranny*) and Chapter Five (*A Kind of Revolution*), the history teacher can help students view history from a different perspective.

However, A People's History of the United States should not be employed as the only source for a US History class. In his two chapters on the Revolutionary Period, Zinn makes only brief references to George Washington. Most scholars of the period would agree that the Revolution would not have succeeded and the Constitution would not have been ratified if not for the presence of George Washington.

Richard Brookhiser and other more traditional historians offer a dramatically different vision of Washington and the Founders than Howard Zinn. In his book, What Would the Founders Do?, Brookhiser writes:

“The first goal of their statecraft was liberty. Liberty drove them to independence, and to remake and amend their government after independence had been won. They knew that liberty had to be channeled in laws and institutions... The founders believed their efforts were favored by God” (Brookhiser pages 215-216).

Their triumphalist perspective sees American history as being driven by great men who do great things. In this view, it would be near criminal for history teachers to minimize the role of George Washington in winning the American Revolution and

framing of the Republic. In The Genius of George Washington, Edmund Morgan writes, “But in his understanding of power he left them all behind, as he did the British generals who opposed him and the French who assisted him. When he retired from the presidency after eight years, he had placed the United States on the way to achieving the power that he had aspired to for it” (Morgan page 25). Morgan emphasizes the role of Washington alone in laying the foundation for future American greatness.

The question remains: what should the American history teacher teach? Can he do justice to both Ebenezer MacIntosh and George Washington? MacIntosh is important because his story illustrates the level of working class discontent in Boston during the 1760’s and 1770’s. The economic stagnation and the resulting decrease in the city’s material wealth during this time period triggered tremendous working class discontent (Nash pages 38-39). The violent reaction to the Stamp Act also hints at the potential for truly social revolution to occur.

However, MacIntosh’s fame and influence was fleeting, particularly when measured against George Washington. History teachers do possess an obligation to emphasize Washington’s place in American history. Students need to develop an understanding of American traditions and institutions in order to become informed citizens. An effective method by which to accomplish this goal is to use biography as a teaching tool. The story of George Washington reinforces for the student the values of duty, honor, and integrity. It is a story which needs to be told.

The issue of what American history to cover should be guided by the dictates of common sense, the goal of producing involved, productive citizens and the obligation to be sensitive to the plight of traditionally marginalized groups and individuals. A purely

triumphalist approach focusing only on the contributions of famous white men no longer suffices. Yet, a text that ignores or disparages the crucial involvement of George Washington can only be used as a supplementary tool, not a consistently reliable source.

The adoption of “moderate triumphalism” by the American history teacher represents a compromise between the extreme visions advocated by Zinn and Brookhiser. Ultimately, high school history is different than the history studied in college. Adopting Zinn’s approach in a high school classroom would leave students with a glaring lack of historical perspective, a misunderstanding of the basic foundations of the American democracy, and a passionate but skewed view of America’s role in the world. High school history needs to expand beyond mere hero worship but most adolescents are not yet cognitively and intellectually ready for a year of American history according to Howard Zinn.

It is okay for the history teacher to call George Washington a great man, even while acknowledging his ownership of slaves and military miscues. There is no need to return to the Parson Weems emphasis on cherry tree chopping or stone throwing, but Washington fits within virtually any reasonable definition of greatness.

A little triumphalism can only help in a society desperately in need of heroes. Many history teachers have eagerly embraced the alternative view. While there is value in skepticism and a more critical analysis of traditional American protagonists, the pendulum may have swung too far in the revisionist direction. Peter Gibbon, in [A Call to Heroism: Renewing America’s Vision of Greatness](#), writes, “Nevertheless, today we are reluctant to call either past or present public figures heroic. We are fearful they might be

illusory, falsely elevated by early death or good spin doctors or the vagaries of history” (Gibbon page 12).

Ebenezer MacIntosh must not be ignored, but his inclusion in any lesson plan should not diminish the role of George Washington and the other Founders. Moderate triumphalism includes room for mention of Ebenezer MacIntosh and Mother Jones, but keeps the focus on the history of a nation that courageously experimented with democracy and then stuck with the system in both good times and bad. A nation that bullied its immigrants but eventually provided a road to success that was unimaginable in the old country. A nation that has consistently exhibited the ability to reform itself, to admit its own mistakes, to revive itself when it appeared to be on life support.

This is the history that the student will not find in A People’s History of the United States. Yet, it is the history that the student needs to learn. There will be ample opportunity in college seminars to dissect every detail of George Washington’s life and theorize about his role in the grand conspiracy to ensure the colonial elite’s economic and social dominance.

In the high school classroom, where time is of the essence and students are still impressionable and relatively uninformed, Washington, Lincoln, the Roosevelts and Martin Luther King cannot be ignored. They were caught in the historical crossfire, refused to surrender, and ultimately helped the nation better fulfill the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. No revisionism should obscure that fact.

Sources

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