

# Compare and contrast the views of howard zinn's presentation of the vietnam war t...

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



Vietnam: Contrasting Viewpoints While both Zinn and the American Promise text begin their discussions of the Vietnam War by identifying the growing dissent among United States' citizens towards the war efforts, Zinn's characterization is heavier handed. Indeed, one might accuse Zinn of conflated rhetoric when he states, " In the course of that war, there developed in the United States the greatest antiwar movement the nation had ever experienced, a movement that played a critical part in bringing the war to an end. It was another startling fact of the sixties" (Zinn). Similarly, both Zinn and the American Promise text begin by describing the combatants, the American Promise text seems to tacitly cast their communist leanings as irrational and in-direct opposition to freedom. Conversely, Zinn elevates their position to equal footing with the United States. Zinn describes North Vietnam as, " a nationalist revolutionary movement in a tiny, peasant country" (Zinn). One can easily argue that Zinn is even romanticizing the North Vietnamese movement, casting them in the mythic role as David in a battle with the United States' Goliath. Zinn's historicism goes on to explore the perspective of the North Vietnamese in more sympathetic details than the American Promise text. Where the American Promise text identifies the promise Kennedy made in fighting against Communist aggression, Zinn's history notes the Atlantic Charter which promised the people the right to choose their own government. It shows that despite such a document, pleas by the North Vietnamese to President Harry Truman went unrecognized. The American Promise also focuses predominantly on the Vietnam War once it was started, and not the factors that ultimately caused the United States' participation.

While of this is surely attributed to the fact that it focuses on American History, key facts are left out, which Zinn includes. One of the most notable of these is that after the French left Vietnam there was scheduled to be an election that would unify the country. It was the United States that stepped in and prevented these elections from occurring, and placed a Vietnamese man who had previously resided in New Jersey in office. Quoting the Pentagon papers, Zinn states, " South Viet Nam was essentially the creation of the United States" (Zinn).

When considering the Gulf of Tonkin incident the two textbooks have slightly different perspectives. While the American Promise acknowledges that there might be more to the attacks than was initially reported by the United States government, Zinn goes considerably farther in claiming that the Gulf of Tonkin attacks were faked by the United States to escalate the war. In the American Promise the authors claim that only the second attack may have been faked, and assert that rather than faking the attacks for the purpose of engaging in warfare, the attacks were merely capitalized on by President Johnson to escalate the war.

There is also a notable difference between the acknowledgements of United States' atrocities in the two texts. While both texts make reference to the amount of bombs that were dropped on Vietnam, noting that the amount of bombs exceeded that which was dropped by the United States during World War II, Zinn goes further in acknowledging the United States' atrocities. Zinn makes reference to the poisonous sprays that were dropped on the Vietnamese and details how such sprays adversely affected civilians, " poisonous sprays were dropped by planes to destroy trees and any kind of

growth—an area the size of the state of Massachusetts was covered with such poison. Vietnamese mothers reported birth defects in their children. Yale biologists, using the same poison (2, 4, 5, T) on mice, reported defective mice born and said they had no reason to believe the effect on humans was different” (Zinn). In addition, Zinn acknowledges the Mai Lai Massacre, as well as the Buddhist suicide protests to the War.

#### References

Roark, et al., *The American Promise*, 4th Edition, Volume C chap 29, "Vietnam and The Limits of Power"

Zinn, Howard. <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/zinnapeopleshistory.html>