

A people's history of the united states essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



A People's History of the United States is a book written by Howard Zinn, whose purpose is not to introduce someone to American History. He assumes his readers already know the basics. Of course, many people do not. It is not a history of the United States but it is a series of contentious corrections to the history traditionally taught in American classrooms.

Zinn presents the major historical facts of the first 250 years of American history starting from when Christopher Columbus's Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria landed in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. It was there that Europeans and Native Americans first came into contact; the Arawak natives came out to greet the whites, and the whites were only interested in finding the gold. " They ... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they owned...They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane... They would make fine servants... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want" (Zinn 1).

This was Columbus first idea as soon as he arrived on the island. Expedition after expedition sent into the interior by Columbus had no success. The gold was not found, and hundreds of Indians had been killed for not finding anything of what was requested. After Columbus, comes Bartolome de Las Casas who was a young priest that participated in the conquest of Cuba, but then gave up and became a vehement critic of Spanish cruelty. Las Casas wanted to replace the Indians by Black slaves, thinking they were stronger

and would survive, but later he found out the effects on black slaves so he decided to tell about the Spaniards and how they treated the Indians.

The Indians attempted to save their lives from the Spaniards who used to cut their bodies in pieces to “ test the sharpness of their blades” (Zinn 6).

The population of the Indians reduced a lot going from 10 million to less than a million. 115 years later and 1500 miles to the north, the colony of Jamestown was founded by a group of English settlers led by John Smith; shortly after that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded by a group of Puritans known to us today as Pilgrims. When the English first settled Martha's Vineyard in 1642, there were probably three thousand Wampanoag left.

“ There were no wars on that island, but by 1764, only 313 Indians were left there... Behind the English invasion of North America, behind their massacre of Indians, their deception, their brutality, was that special powerful drive born in civilizations based on private property. It was a morally ambiguous drive; the need for space, for land, was a real human need. But in conditions of scarcity, in a barbarous epoch of history ruled by competition, this human need was transformed into the murder of whole peoples” (Zinn 16).

This is how the real history began. Not only with triumphs and victories but also with blood spread all over the lands where the “ wars” took place.

Reflection I

ZINN'S DARK SIDES OF COLUMBUS

In *A People's History of the United States*, Zinn writes about the dark sides of United States icons. I believe Zinn feels that students are merely being taught from the viewpoint of a person in power rather than including the views of the oppressed. In the first chapter of his book, Howard Zinn suggests that we should think about what Christopher Columbus did to others to become so famous. It is implied that this author is not really being amiable toward this hero, and the fact that he is trying to make it obvious to us that Columbus took the American Arawak Indians as slaves, took advantage of their goods, and killed thousands proves this.

In my opinion, even though we should not hide the fact that Columbus and other heroes were not perfect, we should not forget all the good they have done. For instance, although Columbus took advantage of the Indians and their good, he gained wealth, as did the Indians that both had previously never enjoyed. Through his discoveries, Columbus cleared the way for the expansion of the European colonies in the Americas. If we strictly look from the viewpoint of the downtrodden we can make our heroes out to seem much worse than they really were.

There is no such thing as unbiased, truthful history. History is in the eye of the teller. In this case, Howard Zinn's view of history of this great country is extremely Marxist. He seems to pick and choose historical data that fits his agenda in an attempt to evoke an emotional response from the reader. He does make some good points pertaining to injustices and misconceptions regarding the idealistic view of history, but unrealistic perceptions are made of the founding and progress of this country. You have to ask yourself, which

is more important, that Columbus made his way to America or that he treated the Indians horribly when he got there? Zinn seems to argue that we cannot end evils like genocide, exploitation, and abuse until we “face” them...drag them into the light of the day. To that point we are in complete agreement. But, the very heart of Zinn’s “history” is distorted. To use the most obvious example; he condemns Columbus for genocide. However, Zinn tries to convey a perspective of history that is not glorified, but that is realistic using his own way. Together with the negative sides Zinn presents us, we should remind ourselves that Columbus was a hero whose impact on history should not be discredited.

Summary II

DRAWING THE COLOR LINE

Racism is the main topic of this chapter which Howard Zinn considers it as one of the most important issues of the world starting from the early 1600s. The “Color Line” was one of the world’s most important problems. Getting to the top of the history, the English were the ones who kept coming to America bringing African slaves into the middle colonies. Before resorting to Africans, the colonists had tried to subdue the Indians, but that idea failed before it was created. Zinn writes:

“ They couldn’t force the Indians to work for them, as Columbus had done. They were outnumbered, and while, with superior firearms, they could massacre the Indians, they would face massacre in return. They could not capture them and keep them enslaved; the Indians were tough, resourceful,

defiant, and at home in these woods, as the transplanted Englishmen were not”.

“ White servants had not yet been brought over in sufficient quantity... As for free white settlers, many of them were skilled craftsmen, or even men of leisure back in England, who were so little inclined to work the land that John Smith, in those early years, had to declare a kind of martial law, organize them into work gangs, and force them into fields for survival...” “ Blacks slaves were the answer. And it was natural to consider imported blacks as slaves, even if the institution of slavers would not be regularized and legalized for several decades” (Zinn 25). As we all know, blacks were treated like slaves and there was a kind of antagonism and animosity toward them. Wherever they went, they were discriminated and humiliated just because of their skin color.

According to Zinn, the first slaves appeared in Virginia and they were brought from Europe. Even though they were called servants, they still belonged to a lower level than the white servants, “ being treated differently, and in fact were slaves” (Zinn, 24).

Zinn continues his identification with the oppressed as he discusses black-white relations. He says that blacks and whites are not naturally prejudiced against each other as some would have us believe; he points to the fact that laws actually had to be passed to keep blacks and whites from fraternizing. Servants and slaves of different races saw each other as oppressed workers first and as members of a specific race second. On the topic of slavery, Zinn

berates the American system, calling it “lifelong, morally crippling destructive of family ties, without hope of any future” (Zinn 27). Some argue that African tribes had slavery of their own so it was a part of their culture to begin with, but Zinn says that “the slaves of Africa were more like the serfs of Europe—in other words, like most of the population of Europe” (Zinn 27).

Black slavery became an American institution that the southern and middle colonies began to depend on for their economic success. Zinn asserts that there were clear contentions between the races that ultimately led to the revolution.

Reflection II

THE BELLIGERENT FEELING OF BEING A RACIST

I noticed that Howard Zinn, the author of the “controversial” book *A People's History of United States* has one purpose and following his goal he is trying to convey his famous ideas that America, no matter how hard it is for us to face it, is not the ultimate guardian of equality, truth and justice it claims to be. The facts are there, in the book, and you can notice them starting from the very single page that introduces the beginning of this “History” book. Maybe this is easier and probably a satisfactory detail for immigrants to know and believe because I am sure that even though people immigrate to America they still store some strong old feelings that are malicious and antagonistic.

I am one of the millions and millions of immigrants that live here in America. I came here only a year and a half ago, but I am certainly against these emotions immigrants usually have toward this gorgeous country. I always believed and thought of America as the country of liberalism, freedom, and opportunities. Of course, like any other thing, America was not and it SM isn't perfect but we can't blame it or even worse characterize it as the country who discriminated black people. In Albania, the place I am from, there was always fear; fear toward the government which since 500 years ago was taken over by Turkey. We were kind of slaves obeying the rules of the Ottoman government and I know how it feels to be treated like a slave especially in your own country. We all know now what a bad thing racism was and how bad it infected our countries, but we cannot change the past.

Instead, we should try to learn from it and try to get our lives better. Now, maybe not truly and completely, there is no more "declared racism" in the world, at least not in USA. In front of the law we are considered equal people with equal rights no matter what color or race we belong to. However, there is a silent humiliation or racism that exists among us. I do not think it has any importance at all but however unimportant it is, it is still not supposed to exist at all.

In Europe, my continent, people are really strange when it comes to racism. They changed from what they used to be before, but there are still marks of aversion toward the "other" people. If we look at this world in another angle different from the one Zinn is looking when he writes this book, we will find ourselves discovering that no matter how slow or fast we are moving, we are

changing and stepping into a better condition to live, a better world for ourselves, a better community to work with, a better universe!

Summary III

PERSONS OF MEAN AND VILE CONDITION

In the third chapter of A People's History of the United States, Howard Zinn writes and describes the history of the colonies in "war" with the English people. Many revolutions were led from the British people in order to secure their lives from the Indian attacks. One of these people was Nathaniel Bacon.

Nathaniel Bacon led a revolution against Virginia governor William Berkeley and his conciliatory Indian policies. Bacon and others who lived on the western frontier wanted more protection from the government against Indian attacks. Berkeley and his cronies were so concerned with their own financial and political gain that they ignored Bacon's Rebellion and continued their policies. In the end, Bacon died a natural death and his friends were hanged, but for the first time ever, the government was forced to listen to the grievances of the underclass that had been for the most part largely ignorable up to that point. Meanwhile, class distinctions became sharper and the poor grew in number. Citizens were put into work houses for debt and occasionally rioted against the wealthy.

More and more though, the anger turned from being just a class war to being a war of nationalities. Impressments and other British policies distracted the colonists from being mad at the bourgeoisie to being mad at their mother

country. At the end of chapter three, the tension is mounting, pitting the Americans against the English and the workers against the rich. The atmosphere was ripe for revolution.

Reflection III

A PROLETARIAN'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

Looking at the first three chapters of A People's History of the United States I would better title it A Proletarian's History of the United States. This is because Howard Zinn's main focus on the book besides the actual history is the effect of the history on the common people and the workers, or proletarians as Marx and Engels referred to them. While most history books focus on the dominating Europeans, Zinn focuses on the dominated Native Americans, who Zinn holds to be at least as advanced as their European masters.

Zinn commiserates with the plight of the oppressed frontier whites, making Nathaniel Bacon out to be a hero. Over the course of the next 80 years, Zinn cites routine injustices against the working and under classes, saying that is "seems quite clear that the class lines hardened through the colonial period; the distinction between rich and poor became sharper" (Zinn 47). It is refreshing and commendable to see a history text that takes a stance on the side of the peoples that seldom get represented.

Zinn is absolutely correct in seeing the ulterior motives of our founding fathers; they realized that splitting from England would be good for them

financially, socially, and politically. What they did was harness the people's anger against them and used it, quite ironically, for their own advancement. Ultimately, for the first 250 years of America's History, there was oppression and class warfare on varying scales that are traditionally ignored or unemphasized by traditional history texts, but Zinn masterfully shows the reader are major and influential parts of American history. To ignore the plight of the conquered and oppressed is to ignore a part of history that cannot be ignored.