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Book Review by Michael Burlingame

THE DISGRACEFUL HOWARD ZINN

Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation Against America, by Mary Grabar.
Regnery Publishing, 352 pages, \$29.99



DESPITE MANY SERIOUS SCHOLARS' denunciations, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* has enjoyed phenomenal success since its publication in 1980: 2.6 million (!) copies sold, incorporation into the curricula of innumerable schools, and the achievement of almost iconic status in popular culture. Mary Grabar's *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America* performs a valuable service by examining Zinn's polemical volume and revealing "just how distorted, manipulative, and plain dishonest" it truly is.

A tireless left-wing activist with a Ph.D. in history, Zinn (1922–2009) urged fellow historians, as Grabar relates, to eschew "disinterested scholarship" in order to bring about "a revolution in the academy." Not all radical academics agreed with his anti-capitalist take on history. Eugene Genovese declined to review Zinn's opus, which he privately described as "incoherent left-wing sloganizing." Michael Kammen called it "a scissors-and-paste-pot job" that devoted too much attention to "historians, historiography, and historical polemic" and hence provided "little space for the substance of history." Kammen acknowledged the need for "a people's history; but not single-minded, simpleminded history, too often of fools, knaves and Robin Hoods."

Eric Foner disapproved of Zinn's "deeply pessimistic vision of the American experience" that emphasized how "stirring protests, strikes and rebellions never seem to accomplish anything." Zinn's approach to "history from the bottom up" was "necessary as a corrective" but was "as limited in its own way as history from the top down." Michael Kazin credited Zinn "with virtuous intentions" but concluded that his book was little more than a "Manichean fable" and a "polemic disguised as history," a book "grounded in a premise better suited to a conspiracy-monger's website than to a work of scholarship" and "unworthy of [the] fame and influence" it won. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., regarded Zinn as "a polemicist, not a historian."

In a 2012 survey conducted by the left-leaning History News Network, asking readers to identify the "least credible history book in print," *A People's History* won second place (just behind David Barton's *The Jefferson Lies* [2012]). Some respondents condemned Zinn's work as "cheap propaganda" and "the historians' equivalent of medical malpractice."

GRABAR'S BOOK SYSTEMATICALLY REVIEWS *A People's History*, comparing it unfavorably to reputable scholars' works. Born in Slovenia but raised in

the U.S., Grabar earned a Ph.D. in English before becoming a resident fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization. She starts with Zinn's influential account of Christopher Columbus, much of it plagiarized from *Columbus: His Enterprise: Exploding the Myth* (1976), a crude work written for high schoolers by his friend and fellow activist Hans Koning. The leftist London *Guardian* described Koning's work as "a highly polemical biography" that told "a dark story of exploitation and fanaticism" tantamount to genocide. Zinn also plagiarized from Edward Countryman, a fellow radical historian.

In addition to copying without attribution from secondary sources, Zinn cited primary sources like Bartolomé de Las Casas's 16th-century *History of the Indies*, from which he quoted passages in a disingenuous manner that misrepresented their significance. Zinn maintained that Columbus thought the tribe he first encountered (the Taíno, whom Zinn calls the Arawaks) was fit for slavery, when in fact the explorer speculated that the wounds sustained by the Bahamian island's natives had been inflicted by mainlanders who sought to enslave them. Zinn ascribed the impulse behind Columbus's mission to greed, ignoring the strong religious motivations of both Columbus and his royal sponsors. He anachro-



nistically depicted the tribes that Columbus encountered on his four voyages—and, in addition, North American tribes that interacted with European settlers in the 17th and 18th centuries—as peaceful feminists, environmentalists, democrats, and communists *avant la lettre*.

ZINN PORTRAYED THE COLONIAL WARS between Native Americans and colonists as battles between inoffending tribes and rapacious settlers. Though acknowledging that both sides committed massacres, he tended to explain away Indians' slaughter of whites and to condemn colonials even when they were resisting attacks, as in King Philip's War during the 1670s. He relied heavily on Gary Nash's politically correct *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* (1974), but failed to quote Nash's gesture toward historical evenhandedness: "[i]t would be mistaken to romanticize Iroquois culture or to judge it superior to the culture of the European invader." The Iroquois and Pequots were as aggressive as any Europeans in their attempts to subdue (and enslave) neighboring tribes.

Just as Zinn romanticized life in precolonial America, he romanticized African society before the Atlantic slave trade. In his view, African feudalism had a "communal spirit" and "more kindness in law and punishment" than its European counterpart, while African slavery was more humane than in the Western hemisphere. Zinn suggested that one third of the slaves conveyed across the Atlantic died at sea, though the most recent scholarly investigations indicate a mortality rate only half that high. He failed to place American slavery and white racism in world and historical context by ignoring or soft-pedaling slavery and racism in the Muslim world and the complicity of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade.

Zinn's sympathetic biographer, the leftist historian Martin Duberman, noted that "Howard's version of our past has been justly criticized as leaving out too much, of presenting a partial and thereby distorted account." A good starting point, Duberman suggested, is the book's treatment of Abraham Lincoln. Zinn presented "a one-dimensional view of a complex, cautious man," he said, ignoring "the fact that unlike most people, Lincoln's capacity for growth was impressive," that he "stood at a substantial distance from the outright racism that dominated Northern opinion," and that Lincoln "was in a decided minority in believing that natural rights belonged to all human beings." Duberman concluded that Zinn's "disparagement of Lincoln is part of a general problem with the way he assigns motivation to individuals. With few exceptions,

only members of the working class or minorities (or their champions) are allowed to represent human nobility and selflessness."

ZINN FAILED TO NOTE THAT WILLIAM Lloyd Garrison, the country's foremost abolitionist spokesman, had been a fierce critic of Lincoln but over time mellowed, insisting toward the end of the Civil War that the president should be judged on the basis "of his possibilities, rather than by our wishes, or by the highest abstract moral standard." Lincoln's

freedom to follow his convictions of duty as an individual is one thing—as the President of the United States, it is limited by the functions of his office; for the people do not elect a President to play the part of reformer or philanthropist, nor to enforce upon the nation his own peculiar ethical or humanitarian ideas, without regard to his oath or their will. His primary and all-comprehensive duty is to maintain the Union and execute the Constitution, in good faith.

Garrison expressed his "firm conviction" that "no man has occupied the chair of the Chief Magistracy in America, who has more assiduously or more honestly endeavored to discharge all its duties with a single eye to the welfare of the country, than Mr. Lincoln."

In 1865, Frederick Douglass hailed Lincoln as "emphatically the black man's President: the first to show any respect for their rights as men." Lincoln "was the first American President" who "rose above the prejudice of his times, and country." If during the early stages of the Civil War the president had favored colonizing the freedmen abroad, Douglass asserted, "Lincoln soon outgrew his colonization ideas and schemes and came to look upon the Black man as an American citizen." Evidence supporting the latter statement was Lincoln's speech of April 11, 1865, two days after Robert E. Lee surrendered, when the president, for the first time, publicly endorsed black voting rights, prompting one member of the audience—John Wilkes Booth—to exclaim to some friends, "That means nigger citizenship. Now by God I'll put him through! That is the last speech he will ever make." So it is proper for us in the 21st century to regard Lincoln as a martyr to black voting rights, as much as Martin Luther King, Jr., or any of the others killed as they championed the civil rights revolution of the 1960s.

Grabar argues that deplorable as was Zinn's misguided treatment of the discovery of America, slavery, and the Civil War, worse still was his treatment of World War II, which she calls

"obscene." Zinn compared internment camps for Japanese Americans to the death camps of Nazi Germany, suggested that the U.S. provoked the attack on Pearl Harbor, insinuated that Franklin Roosevelt's failure to take special steps to protect Europe's Jews made him as morally culpable as Hitler, argued that America's policy of having its army segregated meant that the country was little better than Nazi Germany, and contended that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki rendered the U.S. as guilty of war crimes as the Japanese, who perpetrated atrocities on a vast scale (e.g., the rape of Nanking).

Grabar's work calls to mind Richard J. Evans's estimable *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (2001), which debunked the work of David Irving. (The story was told in the 2016 film *Denial*.)

Zinn's misguided message is conveyed not only in his book but through the Zinn Education Project, a popular website that educators consult with unfortunate frequency. They would be better advised to access the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History site, gilderlehrman.org, which features lectures and other materials by serious scholars.

IN EXPLAINING THE POPULARITY OF ZINN'S book among "the young and uninformed," Graber emphasizes what Stanford education professor Sam Wineberg called its ability to "speak to our inner Holden Caulfield," the sneering adolescent protagonist of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, to whom "our heroes are shameless frauds, our parents and teachers conniving liars, our textbooks propagandistic slop." "They're all phonies," Wineberg concluded, remains "a message that never goes out of style."

The appearance of Grabar's book would be welcome at any time, but is especially relevant now that the *New York Times* has reincarnated the spirit of Howard Zinn with its "1619 Project." It describes the U.S. as a country founded as a slavocracy with racism in its very DNA, an interpretation of the American past as misguided as Zinn's attempt to characterize all of U.S. history as a tale of class conflict. Grabar offers valuable correctives to such grossly distorted versions of the past, similar to the corrective that leading historians of slavery, the Civil War, and the American Founding (among them Gordon Wood, James McPherson, James Oakes, and Richard Carwardine) have presented in recent postings on, of all places, the World Socialist Web Site.

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