

# American Federation of Teachers' journal slanders historian Howard Zinn

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The Winter 2012-2013 issue of *American Educator*, a quarterly journal published by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), features an article on Howard Zinn's well-known *A People's History of the United States*. The article, by Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg, is entitled, "Undue Certainty: Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short."

Zinn's work is justly famous for its exposure of certain myths about American capitalism and crimes of the US ruling class. Two million copies of *A People's History* are in print, and generations of teachers and students have learned from the book.

The radical activist and historian, who taught at Boston University for a quarter of a century, died three years ago. Why have the editors of *American Educator* chosen this moment to publish an eight-page article devoted to *A People's History*?

The answer to this question becomes clearer as Wineburg proceeds with his review. He begins with almost exaggerated praise for Zinn, devoting five introductory paragraphs to this. Wineburg calls the book "a cultural icon." His first paragraph refers to Matt Damon's applause for *A People's History* in the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*.

In the rest of the article, however, Wineburg reveals that this introductory approbation is essentially window dressing, designed to ward off any charge of bias on his part against Zinn, any claim that this lengthy article is unfair or "unbalanced." Indeed, that is his main charge against Zinn. Wineburg claims to uphold basic standards of objectivity. By the end of his article, Wineburg has gone so far as to slander Zinn's work as posing the danger of "a slide into intellectual fascism."

Wineburg begins by claiming to agree with some of Zinn's views. He couches his criticism in terms of method and procedure. "I am less concerned with what Zinn says than his warrant for saying it, less interested in the words that meet the eye than with the book's interpretive circuitry that doesn't," he writes. These words are disingenuous, to say the least. Wineburg is indeed very concerned with "what Zinn says."

His charge is that Zinn is careless, partisan and inaccurate. Zinn, Wineburg explains, uses secondary instead of primary sources for the most part. *A People's History* is not footnoted. Zinn engages in counterfactual history—reconsidering past events as if certain events and decisions hadn't taken place, which Wineburg considers risky if not improper.

These claims are, whatever Wineburg may say, largely a smokescreen to hide the real grievances he has with Zinn. The historian never hid his partisanship. On the contrary, he was proud of it. He also never claimed that *A People's History* was the final word, but definitely saw it as a necessary antidote to the way history was generally taught. This is really what has Wineburg upset.

Zinn had serious weaknesses, as the WWSWS has discussed in some detail. (See "Howard Zinn, 1922-2010") His approach to US history, including his treatment of the American Revolution and the Civil War, suffered from an anachronistic and abstract moralizing that prevented him

from grasping the revolutionary character of these earlier struggles. This approach, a tendency to see history as an endless and to a great extent unchanging and doomed battle of oppressed against oppressor, was bound up with a pessimistic approach to present struggles.

This is not what concerns Wineburg, however. He and the AFT are attacking Zinn's *strengths*, not his weaknesses. Wineburg zeroes in on Chapter 16 of *A People's History*—"A People's War?"—among the strongest sections of the book. Here Zinn deals with seminal events of the 20th century, tracing American capitalism's preparations for the Second World War and then dealing with the war itself and the Cold War that followed.

While this is perhaps the most compelling portion of Zinn's book, for Wineburg it is the weakest. He devotes more than half of his piece to attacks on this single chapter. As we shall see when we examine his arguments, this sensitivity to Zinn's treatment of the war and the anti-communist witch-hunt that followed it reveals the pro-imperialist foundation of the AFT and the entire AFL-CIO.

Wineburg is scandalized by Zinn's exposure of the democratic and anti-fascist pretensions of American imperialism in the conflict with the Nazi regime. Zinn shows that World War II was, for the US government, bound up with the drive for the supremacy of American capitalism in the postwar world. He also explains that opposition to the war within the American working class was far greater than has been revealed in official histories.

Zinn also discusses, in addition to the thousands of strikes in defiance of the no-strike pledges enforced by the AFL and CIO during this period, opposition to the war among African-Americans, many of whom recognized the hypocrisy of the claim that the US was fighting for democracy against fascism while upholding Jim Crow segregation at home.

Wineburg is particularly outraged by this argument. He accuses Zinn of relying on anecdotes, and then delivers what he obviously considers a body blow to Zinn's account—statistical evidence showing that the percentage of black Selective Service registrants who were enrolled as conscientious objectors was tiny compared to the percentage of white registrants.

This supposedly proves that Zinn is a liar, and that African-American support for the war effort was overwhelming. In fact, it proves nothing of the kind. Wineburg only demonstrates his own bias and ignorance. Conscientious objectors, including pacifists and those who claimed religious motives, came overwhelmingly from middle class layers of the population. At that time, the great majority of the black population would have barely known of the conscientious objection option. Even where black men were aware of it, they were not inclined to take that route as an expression of their hostility to capitalism and Jim Crow.

Wineburg goes on to fault Zinn for his exposure of the ruthless British and American bombings of German cities, including the notorious firebombing of Dresden in early 1945 that cost tens of thousands of lives. He does not seriously attempt to defend these attacks, but instead tries to

deflect the criticism by complaining about Zinn's methods and also referring to the even more vicious crimes of the Nazis.

The Stanford academic then deals with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which incinerated hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians, in August 1945. He defends the US use of nuclear weapons for the first time in history. His arguments add nothing to the apologias offered in the past for that monstrous crime, referring to the alleged insincerity of Japanese offers to surrender and the need for unconditional surrender to avoid the casualties that would have resulted from an American ground assault. He accuses Zinn of improper and insufficiently "humble" use of "counterfactual" arguments.

Zinn's account of this period is powerful in large part because it points out that the real war aims of American imperialism in 1941-45 were actually demonstrated by subsequent events. Wineburg, despite his efforts to dress up the atomic bombings and Dresden in "democratic" clothing by comparing these atrocities to those of the Nazis, cannot explain the mass killings against defenseless populations carried out by the US military all over the world since 1945, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, nor can he say anything about state assassinations and drone killings under the Obama administration.

Finally, there is Wineburg's reference to the Cold War and to the conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as spies for the Soviet Union. Here Wineburg shows his hand perhaps most explicitly. According to him, Zinn must apologize for the two and a half pages he devotes to the case in *A People's History*.

Zinn shows how the Rosenbergs' conviction for espionage on behalf of a wartime ally was used to fuel the anti-communist witch-hunt. When co-defendant Morton Sobell acknowledged at the age of 91, 55 years after the Rosenbergs' execution in 1953, that Julius was guilty of helping the Soviets, Zinn was asked to comment, and replied, "To me it didn't matter whether they were guilty or not. The most important thing was they did not get a fair trial in the atmosphere of cold war hysteria." As far as Wineburg is concerned, this is proof of Zinn's prejudice.

What exactly is Zinn guilty of? He was right to cast doubt on the trial, conducted in McCarthyite fashion at the height of the purges. He was right to show that the Rosenbergs were casualties of the anti-communist hysteria. Julius was a victim of this ruthless campaign, and Ethel, even defenders of the trial now admit, was guilty of nothing but refusing to turn her husband over to the executioners.

Wineburg's lengthy treatment of Chapter 16 of *A People's History* shows what really motivates him and the AFT officialdom as a whole. Zinn and Wineburg stand on opposite sides at key moments of the 20th century—the former, with all his limitations, on the side of the oppressed and the latter consistently defending the interests of American capitalism, the most reactionary force on the planet.

The AFT's hostility to Zinn's work, especially concerning the critical era from the 1930s to the 1950s, is intimately bound up with its own history. The American Federation of Teachers, now claiming some 1.5 million members, traces its origins back more than a century, but it only emerged as a significant force about 50 years ago, and grew in size from about 65,000 to 400,000 members in the decade of the 1960s.

Like the rest of the AFL-CIO, the AFT—formed out of the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955—was steeped in anti-communism. The union bureaucracy carried out its own witch-hunt to eliminate all left-wing dissidents and those who sought to build a genuine revolutionary leadership during these difficult years.

Within the right-wing AFL-CIO bureaucracy, the leadership of the AFT was among the most consistent in its support for US imperialism. Its longtime president, Albert Shanker, had been trained by ex-Marxists who moved rapidly to the right. Chief among the influences on Shanker was Max Shachtman, a founder of the Trotskyist movement who broke from it in 1940 when, on the eve of US entry into the Second World War, he

abandoned the Trotskyist analysis and struggle against Stalinism.

For Shachtman and his faction, the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy meant it was no longer possible to defend the USSR against imperialism. This was the start of Shachtman's sharp turn to the right, which would lead him, 10 years later, to support imperialism in the Korean War. Shanker was a member of the Shachtmanite youth movement at around this time at the University of Illinois.

By the 1960s, Shachtman had become an influential behind-the-scenes adviser to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy under George Meany. Shanker led the AFT during this same period. He gave his enthusiastic support to the most right-wing elements within the bureaucracy, supporting the Vietnam War and the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, the political lobby founded by Democratic Senator Henry Jackson in 1972.

Shanker's successor, Randi Weingarten, has made some tactical modifications in the union's political role, but only to further solidify its alliance with the Democratic Party. The AFT has accepted proposals for standardized testing and collaborated with the nationwide campaign for charter schools. In the Winter 2010 issue of *American Educator*, the union editorialized in favor of the Obama administration's proposed Common Core Curriculum, which is inseparably connected with these attacks on public education. *American Educator* at one point endorsed this curriculum on the grounds that it would make the US more competitive with its imperialist rivals and because it "specifies what to teach." Opponents of the Common Core Curriculum have noted that its stated goal of improving reading test scores is to be achieved by forcing students to read more "information texts" and less literature, fiction and criticism.

One aim of the Common Core Curriculum is to steer students toward a sanitized version of American history and to ensure that they are not introduced to textbooks or literature, including *A People's History*, that encourage a critical attitude toward the profit system and the role of American imperialism in particular.

The AFT's attack on Zinn, like its support for the Common Core Curriculum, demonstrates that the union loyally defends the status quo. Wineburg's attack is in part a preemptive attack, a warning that it will do its best to see that no exposure of the ruling elite is presented in middle- and high school classrooms. Just as it actively assisted the witch-hunt 60 years ago, it will back or organize similar attacks in the future. Many teachers are rightly enraged by *American Educator*'s attack on Zinn. They must also see, however, that the AFT's treachery is part of the role played by the unions as a whole. The defense of public education and historical truth is bound up with the defense of living standards and all basic social rights, and requires a political struggle against the bipartisan attacks of big business and their union accomplices.



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