

TAH Final Project

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Howard Zinn on WWII

Prologue/Rationale

Due to the fact that our group's fearless leader seems to have such strong feelings about the work of Howard Zinn, I figured it would be a great idea to have my AP I students do a comparative study over the summer. In their standard textbook, *The American Pageant*, they had read up to Reconstruction. The task that I gave them was to keep a journal of Zinn's quotes and their own reactions to Zinn over the first nine chapters of Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. At the end of each chapter they had to do a comparison between the two perspectives. The vast majority of my 30 students were impressed by the vast differences between the two- and most commented on how depressed they became reading the history. Since Peter suggested that a final project could be looking at Zinn's take on the Cold War, I thought I would take it on. I am not all that happy that I did- I too found it depressing. However, I do think that pieces of Zinn's analysis are worthy of sharing with students.

Typically I have my students analyze US foreign policy decisions prior to the war. They analyze all the key neutrality documents searching for the point when US entry became inevitable. They also use the same documents (from Nye Commission to Lend-Lease) to assess the US as a world leader. As we move forward with the war and beyond, the students have to examine how well the United States upheld the principles set forth in the Atlantic Charter. This last point is similar to one of the questions that Zinn himself brings up in his analysis of the time period and the motives of the United States, however, I found that Zinn's main thesis for WWII and the Cold War was that the United States entered World War II to expand its own empire to be grossly overstated.

To set the stage for his thesis that WWII was a war for US imperialism, Zinn reviews previous wars and interventions that the United States was involved in during the 19th and early twentieth centuries. While it is pretty easy to show that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848, following the defeat of Mexico- in a war that we manufactured is despicable- it does not necessarily mean that wars and actions taken later in the twentieth century were for the same premise; American imperialism. Zinn espouses about Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii, and China as further evidence of imperial building- a fact that no one, not even everyday run of the mill textbooks disputes. As he ventures into our exploits during Roosevelt's Big Stick

diplomacy and William H. Taft's Dollar Diplomacy, it is painfully obvious to the reader that many of our previous foreign wars and interventions were about US imperialism- we were empire building- "nation building" as some choose to point out - plain and simple. US involvement in WWI is not different, according to Zinn, who brings in W.E.B. Du Bois' article that appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in May Of 1915, entitled, The African Roots of War, demonstrating the imperialistic nature of the war. Zinn of course takes it a step further pointing out how the war helped a slowing economy and how financiers like J.P. Morgan helped fund the Allied demand for war materials in the form of debts - and got rich in the process. Zinn of course has to skim quickly over the overly idealistic leader of the United States of the time- Woodrow Wilson- a pacifist, scholar and visionary who thought he alone could save the world from itself- as espoused in his 14 Points for Peace.

After a masterful job of stating mostly the obvious about our previous imperialistic overtones, Zinn quickly approaches the connections with WWII:

"In short, if the entrance of the United States into World War II was (as so many Americans believed at the time, observing the Nazi invasions) to defend the principle of nonintervention in the affairs of other

countries, the nation's record cast doubt on its ability to uphold that principle."

With that seed planted, Zinn fatefully attempts to compare United States' racism at home with Hitler's persecution of the Jews as further evidence of our inability to fight a war for freedom. In fact, Zinn takes it even a step further when he mentions that the United States did little to stop the persecutions- but had rather joined England and France in appeasing Hitler during the 1930s. While these comparisons might well be fathomable, Zinn seems to forget that the United States at this time- did not see itself- nor was it- a world leader. It was overly isolationists when it came to events outside its hemisphere. This was the established pattern of our history that Zinn fails to bring to the discussion.

Zinn's next line of reasoning is similarly presented. If we did nothing for the Jews, if we did nothing for Ethiopia, if we did nothing for Austria and Czechoslovakia and Poland- than we cannot ever go to war for the freedom of those people. Zinn's looks at these events in a vacuum, and never contemplates that the public was vehemently opposed to any action that would move us closer to military action- as the public response to F.D.R.'s Quarantine Speech of the 1930s had shown. What really stands out at this point in Zinn's presentation however, are his comments about Pearl Harbor.

Once again he lulls us to sleep with his repetitive single-sided argument as he explains that the United States could not have gone to war against Japan because of Pearl Harbor because we did not go to war against Japan for her actions in China earlier. Once again, the American public would not support military action against China at the time- did we attempt to persuade the Japanese to end the campaign through the use of embargoes- sure, but Zinn, once again, limits our options- we are either all in- or we supposedly can never get in. Pearl Harbor, Zinn finally states, was the impetus for war because it was an attack on the American Pacific empire. Does Zinn mention the lives lost? Yes, but remember, if we didn't get involved in response to the bombing of China- we can't get involved when Americans are killed on an American Naval base. Zinn writes as if America should be the almighty, smiting down all those that deviate from the moral path, never erring, never being influenced by its past, or thinking of the implications of its current actions on the future. Very black and white- very simplistic.

The American people finally supported action after Pearl. F.D.R. had been leading them in that direction for some time. World leadership, and the responsibility that came with it, was the product of the war for the United States. Isolationism was no longer a choice in the post World War II era.