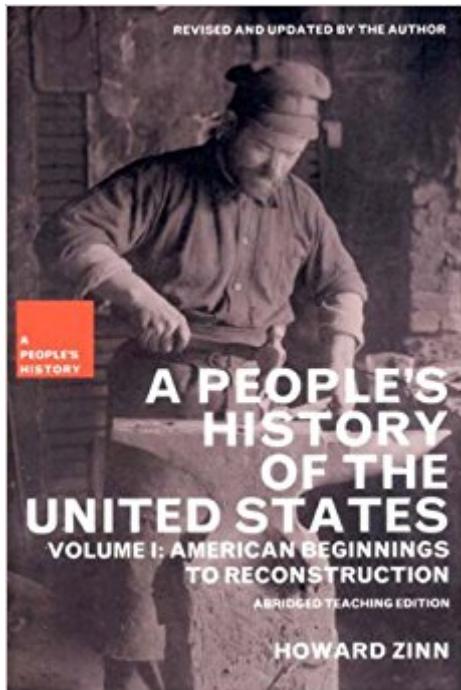


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A People's History Of The United States: American Beginnings To Reconstruction (New Press People's History)



Synopsis

Volume I of the abridged teaching edition of the bestselling history of the United States. Includes teaching materials to accompany each chapter.

Book Information

Series: New Press People's History (Book 1)

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: The New Press; Abridged teaching edition (August 1, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1565847245

ISBN-13: 978-1565847248

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (2,238 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #453,916 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #203 inÂ Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Study & Teaching #386 inÂ Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Reference #707 inÂ Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Instruction Methods > Arts & Humanities

Customer Reviews

For several years of the last decade, I taught Advanced Placement U.S. History at a high school in northern Virginia. When I began the course, Zinn had already been assigned by my predecessor, and I needed a counterpoint to the main text (Bailey and Kennedy's bombastic, traditionalist, and short-on-social history "Pageant of the American Nation"). Zinn's deftly written book provided a fortunate antithesis to the "march of presidents and industrial titans" approach to American history. I found many chapters of this book to be such excellent stimulants to class discussions that I extended their use into my non-AP U.S. history classes, where students, many of whom could not otherwise have cared less about history, found themselves reading an interesting and provocative historian for the first time in their lives. Many of the best discussions I ever had with my classes (both AP and "regular") began with assigned chapters from Zinn. From there, it was an easy step to move on to the idea of historiography (the history of how history has been interpreted) and to decoupling my students from thinking of the textbook as revealed wisdom. Yes, this book has its faults, as many of the previous reviews point out. It is very left-leaning. It does sometimes omit factual points that do not support its line of argument. It does sometimes verge on equating the

misdeeds of American leaders with the horrific malevolence of the leaders of totalitarian states. It does romanticize its heroes. For all that, though, this book is an excellent introduction to U.S. history if read as a contrasting voice to more traditional narratives. It is a fine and vigorous antidote to the excessively reverent tone of many high school textbooks.

History is, in its way, a fiction. While it is made up of facts, things that are verifiable or at least reliably accepted as being what really happened, our understanding of history rests on a certain assumption that doesn't always hold up - that what we are reading or hearing is The Truth. It's how we learn about history when we're kids - that this happened and that happened, and that's all we really need to know. The problem, however, is that what we got in our history books wasn't the entire story. Oh, it was true, for a given value of "true," but the historian who wrote the book did so with a specific narrative in mind, one that fit his or her perception of the past and which - more importantly - would sell textbooks to hundreds of schools across the country. The history that we get from those books is designed to appeal to the sensibilities of a populace that is already inclined to think well of its nation, and rarely deviates from the theme. While they do try to note the excesses, injustices and impropriety of the past, they tend to bury it in the glorious achievements of governments and industry. Unfortunately, doing so means that there's a lot of history that gets left on the cutting room floor. Incidents, people, whole populations get brushed aside because either there's not enough room for them or because telling their story in detail ruins the mood that the historian is trying to set - usually one of bright optimism for a good and just nation. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, either. An historian cannot practically include all of the historical viewpoints, good and bad, into a book meant to be used for only 180 days out of the year.

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