

Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States” and Schweikart & Allen’s “A Patriot’s History of the United States”

The goal of this assignment is to demonstrate an understanding of the articles written by historians Howard Zinn and Larry Schweikart & Michael Allen. You will do so by completing the following three steps:

I. Highlight (or underline) and take notes on the articles you read.

Your highlighting and notations should reflect an “intellectual exchange” between you and the article (i.e., you should be highlighting key points, as well as writing down questions, comments, and summaries in the margins). You will turn in the article (covered with your highlighting and notations) in to me.

II. Answer the study questions.

Answer the five sets of questions below with *thoughtful, detailed* and *reflective* answers. Turn in a paper copy.

Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States”

1. Zinn begins his discussion of the Constitution by providing quotes from Michener, Litwack, and Marshall. A) How do the beliefs of Michener compare to those of Litwack and Marshall? Explain in your own words. B) Do you agree with the views of Michener or those of Litwack and Marshall? Explain and defend your answer.
2. A) What are *The Federalist Papers*? Explain in your own words. B) What did James Madison, one of the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, mean when he said representative democracy is in many ways undemocratic? Explain in your own words. C) What overall point is Zinn trying to make about modern representative government? Explain in your own words. D) Do you agree or disagree with Zinn’s analysis? Explain and defend your answer.

Howard Zinn’s “Declarations of Independence”

3. A) What does historian Charles Beard mean when he said that the Constitution is not neutral? Explain in your own words. B) How, according to Zinn and Beard, did self-interest motivate the fifty-five signers of the Constitution to support the Constitution? Explain in your own words.
4. A) What is Zinn’s argument regarding the importance of the Bill of Rights in winning public support for the Constitution? Explain in your own words. B) What is Zinn’s view of how governments use patriotism and unity? Explain in your own words. C) Do you agree with his analysis? Explain and defend your answer.

Schweikart & Allen’s “A Patriot’s History of the United States”

5. A) What key arguments do Schweikart & Allen make to challenge the theories of Beard and Zinn? Explain in your own words. B) Ultimately, which historians do you agree with most: Zinn or Schweikart & Allen? Elaborate and defend your answer.

III. Participate in a graded oral discussion.

Your verbal participation must reflect a high degree of participation as well as a detailed understanding of the articles.

(Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States")

Amid the enthusiastic celebrations in 1987 surrounding the bicentennial of the Constitution, novelist James Michener wrote:

The writing of the constitution of the United States is an act of such genius that philosophers still wonder at its accomplishment and envy its results. Fifty-five typical American citizens...fashioned a nearly perfect instrument of government...their decision to divide the power of the government into three parts - Legislative, Executive, Judicial - was a masterstroke.

During our 1987 celebrations, former Chief Justice Warren Burger, chairman of the Bicentennial Commission, delivered the usual superlatives to the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. But the sole black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall spoke this way:

In this bicentennial year, we may not all participate in the festivities with flag-waving fervor. Some may more quietly commemorate the suffering, struggle, and sacrifice that has triumphed over much of what was wrong with the original document, and observe the anniversary with hopes not realized and promises not fulfilled.

Historian Leon Litwack has written:

It had been the genius of the Founding Fathers to sanction, protect, and reinforce the enslavement of black men and women.. It had been the genius of the founders to build safeguards for slavery into the Constitution without even mentioning slavery by name. The legitimization of slavery was the price of the new federal union. and the Founding Fathers shared... the assumption that blacks were culturally and genetically unsuited for democracy.

Today, Americans still celebrate the Constitution; they learn in school about checks and balances and what Michener called "the master stroke" of dividing the government into Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches. We hold elections, vote for president and representatives in Congress, and think *that* is democracy. Yet for black people in this country, none of those institutions-not the Constitution, not the three branches of the government, not voting for representatives- has been the source of whatever progress has been made toward racial equality.

Before we rush to conclude that representative government has worked for white people in this country, but not for blacks, we should consider it is the special gift of oppressed groups to reveal universal truths. French writer Fourier said that you could tell the state of progress in any society by looking at the condition of women, and George Bernard Shaw said that you could measure the condition of society by the treatment of its prisoners.

The history of blacks in the United States exposes dramatically the American political system. With that history makes clear is that our traditional, must-praised democratic institutions-representatives, government, voting, and constitutional law-have never proved adequate for solving critical problems of human rights.

Theories of representative government became prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when monarchies and feudal arrangements were being challenged by rising classes of merchants and manufacturers. People were moving into cities and the new middle classes wanted more power in government.

The new way of thinking was expressed by John Locke. He was an adviser to the Whig party, which wanted to diminish the power of the king and increase that of Parliament. Locke wrote about the advantages of representative government. His name is associated with the idea of "social contract", under which the

community - wanting more order, less trouble, and more safeguards for life, liberty, and property - agrees to choose representatives who would accomplish these purposes.

Locke said that in ancient times in the “state of nature” people got along quite well, but this was disrupted by money, commerce, and greed. Monarchy didn’t help, because kings acted as if they were in a state of nature, not responsible to the community. Now, Locke said, you needed settled law, judges, and a stable society based on the will of the majority represented by the legislature. The legislature would be the supreme power, Locke proposed, but it had to abide by the terms of the contract, to promote peace, safety and the public good. If the government ever seriously violated the contract, rebellion might be justified, Locke said.

Therefore, although written in the 1680’s Locke’s statements almost have the idealistic ring of the Declaration Of Independence. But there is something suspect about his theory. It pretends that there is some nice unified community that agrees to set up this constitutional government. In reality, there was no such unity, neither in England, nor in the American colonies. There were rich and poor, and the poor are never in a position to sign a contract on equal terms with the rich. They were not usually consulted when a contract is drawn up, after which they were told: “we agreed on this.” So while it may sound good that property and liberty will be protected by representative government, in reality it is the property and liberty of the wealthy and powerful that is most likely to be protected.

The American revolutionists had probably not read John Locke. They didn’t have to. They were moved by similar circumstances: The necessity to overthrow monarchical rule, to put forth a rhetoric that would win popular support, and then to set up a government that would be more democratic than a monarchy. It would be a representative government (a revolutionary idea at the time), but one that would represent the interests of the wealthy classes most of all. And so, the Declaration of Independence, a masterpiece of rhetorical idealism, was followed by the Constitution, a masterpiece of ambiguous practicality.

That combination of rhetoric and ambiguity appeared in the Bill of Rights itself, in the Fifth Amendment, which says no person shall be deprived of “life, liberty or property” without due process of law. The white person might be thankful that “liberty” was safe, but the black slave, knowing that he or she was a “property” might well be unimpressed. Indeed when the Supreme Court in 1857 had to decide between Dred Scott’s liberty and his former master’s property, it decided for property and declared Dred Scott a non person, to be returned to slavery.

Those who were not “fifty-five typical American citizens”, (James Michener’s phrase) who drew up the Constitution. At that convention there was no representation of black people, who at that time numbered about one-fifth of the population of the states. There was no representation of the women, who were half the population, and certainly no representation of Indians, who’s land all the colonists were occupying.

The Indians, like blacks, were not looked on as human beings by those who were fighting a revolution in the name of freedom. Six months after the battles of Lexington and Concord, the Massachusetts legislature proclaimed monetary rewards for dead Indians: “For every scalp of a male Indian brought in... forty pounds. The constitution was blatant in its representation of the interests of the slaveholders. It included the provision (article IV section 2) that escaped slaves must be delivered back to their masters. Roger Sherman pointed out to the convention that the return of runaway horses was not demanded with such specific concern, but he was ignored.

In eighty-five newspaper articles (*The Federalist Papers*), arguing for the ratification of the Constitution among New York state voters (blacks, women, Indians, and whites without property excluded), James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay were quite frank. Madison wrote that representative government was a good way of calming the demand of people “for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked object.” It would accomplish this by creating too big a nation for a revolt to spread easily and by filtering the anger of rebels through more reasonable representatives.

The authors of *The Federalist Papers* explained, more candidly than any other political leaders of the nation have done since, what the institution of representative government is really for, as they put it (it is not clear whether Madison or Hamilton write this), speaking of the usefulness of the state:

I shall not scruple to add that such an institution may be sometimes necessary as a defense to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions... There are particular movements in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn. In these critical movements, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justices, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind?

That passage suggests what whites as well as blacks, men as well as women, might look with suspicion on the claims of modern representative government – that while it indeed is an improvement over monarchy, and may be sued to bring about some reforms, it is chiefly used by those holding power in society as a democratic façade for a controlled society and a barrier against demands that threaten their interests.

(Howard Zinn’s “Declarations of Independence”)

Historian Charles Beard warned us that governments - including the government of the United States - are not neutral, that they represent the dominant economic interests, and that their constitutions are indeed to serve these interests. One of his critics (Robert E. Brown, author of *Charles Beard and the Constitution*) raises an interesting point. Granted that the Constitution omitted the phrase “life liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” which appeared in the Declaration of Independence and substituted “life, liberty, and property”- well why shouldn’t the Constitution protect property? As Brown says about Revolutionary America, “Practically everybody was interested in the protection of property” because so many Americans owned property.

However, this is misleading. True, there were many property owners. But some people had much more than others. A few people had great amounts of property; many people had small amounts; others had none. Jackson Main found that one-third of the population in the Revolutionary period were small farmers, while only 3 percent of the population had truly large holdings and could be considered wealthy.

Still, one third was a considerable amount of people who felt they had something at stake in the stability of a new government. This was a larger base of support for government than anywhere in the world at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, the city mechanics had an important interest in a government which would protect their work from foreign competition. As Stoughton Lynd puts it: “how is it that the city workingmen all over America overwhelming and enthusiastically supported the United States Constitution?”

This was especially true in New York. When the ninth and tenth states had ratified the Constitution, four thousand New York City mechanics marched with floats and banners to celebrate. Bakers, blacksmiths, brewers, shipyard workers, coopers, cartmen and tailors, all marched. What Lynd found was that these mechanics, while opposing elite rule in the colonies, were nationalist. Mechanics comprised perhaps half the New York population. Some were wealthy, some were poor, but all were better off than the ordinary laborer, the apprentice, the journeyman, and their prosperity required a government that would protect them against the British hats and shoes and other goods that were pouring into the colonies after the Revolution. As a result, the mechanics often supported wealthy conservatives at the ballot box.

The Constitution, then, illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of a wealthy elite, but also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers, to

build a broad base of support. The slightly prosperous people who make this base of support are buffers against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law-all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.

The Constitution became even more acceptable to the public at large after the first congress, responding to criticism, passed a series of amendments known as the Bill of rights. These amendments seemed to make the new government a guardian of peoples liberties: to speak, to publish, to worship, to petition, to assemble, to be tried fairly, to be secure at home against official intrusion. It was, therefore, perfectly designed to build popular backing for the new government. What was not made clear-it was a time when the language of freedom was new and its reality untested-was the shakiness of anyone's liberty when entrusted to a government of the rich and powerful.

Indeed, the same problem existed for the other provisions of the Constitution, like the clause forbidding states to "impair the obligation of contract," or that giving Congress the power to tax the people and to appropriate money. They all sound benign and neutral until one asks: Tax who, for what? Appropriate what, for whom? To protect everyone's contracts seems like an act of fairness, of equal treatment, until one considers that contracts made between employer and employee, landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor, generally favor the more powerful of the two parties. Thus, to protect these contracts is to put the great power of the government, its laws, courts, sheriffs, police, on the side of the privileged-and to do it not, as in premodern times, as an exercise of brute force against the weak but as a matter of law.

**(Schweikart & Allen's "A Patriot's History of the
United States")**

Much printer's ink has been spilled by historians arguing about the relative merits of the positions held by the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. Prior to the twentieth century, the Federalists held an elevated position in the minds of most Americans who were conscious of history. But in 1913, Charles Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* delivered a broadside accelerated by economic principles of the class struggle. Beard argued that the Federalists, acting on their own self-interest as planters and businessmen, greedily plotted to ensure their own economic supremacy. Using voting records of the delegates, and examining their backgrounds, Beard concluded there was little concern for the public interest by these founders. In 1958, Forrest McDonald dismantled Beard economic determinism, only to be countered by Robert McGuire and Robert Ohsfelt's voting-model analysis.

It goes without saying that Beard is correct to identify the Anti-Federalists as farmers and middle-class workingmen, but this definition bridges a wide range of the population in 1787, including subsistence farmers in western Pennsylvania and upstate New York alongside elite southern planters who led the movement. Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, William Grayson, and James Monroe, firm Anti-Federalist leaders, were as wealthy as any in the Federalist camp, and were joined by Sam Adams (a chronic bankrupt), Melancton Smith, Luther Martin, and New York's George Clinton. Thomas Jefferson, arguably the best known Anti-Federalist of all, did not join the movement until the early 1790s and, at any rate, was out of the country from 1787-88.

And yet, Beard's definitions and the complaints by Howard Zinn and his disciples wrongly assume that people were (and are) incapable of acting outside of self-interest. Had not the great George Washington argued as much? Yet Washington had to look no further than his own life to realize the error of his position: he was on track to gain a general officer's commission in the British army, replete with additional land grants for dutiful service to His Majesty. Instead, Washington threw it away to lead a ragtag army of malcontents into the snow of Valley Forge and the icy waters of the Delaware. Self-interest indeed! What self-interest caused Francis Lewis, a signer of the Declaration, to lose his properties and see his wife taken prisoner by the British? How does self-interest account for the fate of Judge Richard Stockton, a delegate from New Jersey to the Continental Congress,

who spent time in British jails and whose family had to live off charity-all because he dared sign the Declaration? On the other hand, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and others all stood to gain handsomely from the growing value of slave labor in the New Constitution-the one they opposed! In sum, no matter how Beard and his successors torture the statistics, they cannot make the Constitutional Convention scream "class struggle". The debate was genuine; it was about important ideas, and men took positions not for what they gained financially but for what they saw as the truth.