The Truth About The United States Of America

A People's History of the United States 1492—Present Howard Zinn HarperPerennial

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In the year 1610, a Catholic priest in the Americas named Father Sandoval wrote back to a church functionary in Europe to ask if the capture, transport, and enslavement of African blacks was legal by church doctrine. A letter dated March 12, 1610, from Brother Luis Brandaon to Father Sandoval gives the answer:

'Your Reverence writes me that you would like to know whether the Negroes who are sent to your parts have been legally captured. To this I reply that I think your Reverence should have no scruples on this point, because this is a matter which has been questioned by the Board of Conscience in Lisbon, and all its members are learned and conscientious men. Nor did the bishops who were in Sao Thome, Cape Verde, and here in Loando — all learned and virtuous men — find fault with it. We have been here ourselves for forty years and there have been among us very learned Fathers . . . never did they consider the trade as illicit. Therefore we and the Fathers of Brazil buy these slaves for our service without any scruple. . . .' (p. 29)

In April 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed an open letter to President Van Buren, referring with indignation to the removal treaty with the Cherokees (signed behind the backs of an overwhelming majority of them) and asked what had happened to the sense of justice in America: "The soul of man, the justice, the mercy that is the heart’s heart in all men, from Maine to Georgia, does abhor this business . . . a crime is projected that confounds our understandings by its magnitude, a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country for how could we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country any more? You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world." ... Some Cherokees had apparently given up on nonviolence: three chiefs who signed the Removal Treaty were found dead. But the seventeen thousand Cherokees were soon rounded up and crowded into stockades. On October 1, 1838, the first detachment set out in what was to be known as the Trail of Tears. As they moved westward, they began to die— of sickness, of drought, of the heat, of exposure. There were 645 wagons, and people marching alongside. Survivors, years later, told of halting at the edge of the Mississippi in the middle of winter, the river running full of ice, “hundreds of sick and dying penned up in wagons or stretched upon the ground.” Grant Foreman, the leading authority on Indian removal, estimates that during confinement in the stockade or on the march westward four thousand Cherokees died.

In December 1838, President Van Buren spoke to Congress: "It affords sincere pleasure to

apprise the Congress of the entire removal of the Cherokee Nation of Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi. The measures authorized by Congress at its last session have had the happiest effects."

Most of the shoeworkers were native-born Americans, Alan Dawley says in his study of the Lynn strike (Class and Community). They did not accept the social and political order that kept them in poverty, however much it was praised in American schools, churches, newspapers. In Lynn, he says, “articulate, activist Irish shoe and leather workers joined Yankees in flatly rejecting the myth of success. Irish and Yankee workers jointly . . . looked for labor candidates when they went to the polls, and resisted strikebreaking by local police.” Trying to understand why this fierce class spirit did not lead to independent revolutionary political action, Dawley concludes that the main reason is that electoral politics drained the energies of the resisters into the channels of the system. (p. 227)

[The ballot box perpetuates the notion that real change can come by manipulating papers rather than by people struggling to change their personal lives, relationships, and communities. The Zinn Reader, Seven Stories Press, New York, 1997: p. 585]

[Jefferson himself spoke of the need for revolutions every twenty years. In the long span between elections, people are passive and captive. The Zinn Reader, Seven Stories Press, New York, 1997: p. 618]

In the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, the law was increasingly interpreted in the courts to suit the capitalist development of the country. Studying this, Morton Horwitz (The Transformation of American Law) points out that the English commonlaw was no longer holy when it stood in the way of business growth. Mill owners were given the legal right to destroy other people’s property by flood to carry on their business. The law of “eminent domain” was used to take farmers’ land and give it to canal companies or railroad companies as subsidies. Judgments for damages against businessmen were taken out of the hands of juries, which were unpredictable, and given to judges. Private settlement of disputes by arbitration was replaced by court settlements, creating more dependence on lawyers, and the legal profession gained in importance. The ancient idea of a fair price for goods gave way in the courts to the idea of caveat emptor (let the buyer beware), thus throwing generations of consumers from that time on to the mercy of businessmen.

That contract law was intended to discriminate against working people and for business is shown by Horwitz in the following example of the early nineteenth century: the courts said that if a worker signed a contract to work for a year, and left before the year was up, he was not entitled to any wages, even for the time he had worked. But the courts at the same time said that if a building business broke a contract, it was entitled to be paid for whatever had been done up to that point. (p. 234)

Horwitz sums up what happened in the courts of law by the time of the Civil War: 'By the middle of the nineteenth century the legal system had been reshaped to the advantage of men of commerce and industry at the expense of farmers, workers, consumers, and other less powerful groups within the society. . . . it actively promoted a legal redistribution of

wealth against the weakest groups in the society.' (p. 235)

By this time [1886] the Supreme Court had accepted the argument that corporations were “persons” and their money was property protected by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. (p. 255)

A Washington Post editorial on the eve of the Spanish-American war: 'A new consciousness seems to have come upon us — the consciousness of strength — and with it a new appetite, the yearning to show our strength. . . . Ambition, interest, land hunger, pride, the mere joy of fighting, whatever it may be, we are animated by a new sensation. We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle. . . .' (p. 292)

Several years before his election to the presidency, William McKinley said: “We want a foreign market for our surplus products.” Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana in early 1897 declared: “American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours.” The Department of State explained in 1898: 'It seems to be conceded that every year we shall be confronted with an increasing surplus of manufactured goods for sale in foreign markets if American operatives and artisans are to be kept employed the year around. The enlargement of foreign consumption of the products of our mills and workshops has, therefore, become a serious problem of statesmanship as well as of commerce.' (p. 292)

... the Colorado coal strike ... began in September 1913 and culminated in the “Ludlow Massacre” of April 1914. Eleven thousand miners in southern Colorado, mostly foreign-born — Greeks, Italians, Serbs — worked for the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corporation, which was owned by the Rockefeller family. Aroused by the murder of one of their organizers, they went on strike against low pay, dangerous conditions, and feudal domination of their lives in towns completely controlled by the mining companies. Mother Jones, at this time an organizer for the United Mine Workers, came into the area, fired up the miners with her oratory, and helped helped them in those critical first months of the strike, until she was arrested, kept in a dungeonlike cell, and then forcibly expelled from the state.

When the strike began, the miners were immediately evicted from their shacks in the mining towns. Aided by the United Mine Workers Union, they set up tents in the nearby hills and carried on the strike, the picketing, from these tent colonies. The gunmen hired by the Rockefeller interests — the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency — using Gatling guns and rifles, raided the tent colonies. The death list of miners grew, but they hung on, drove back an armored train in a gun battle, fought to keep out strikebreakers. With the miners resisting, refusing to give in, the mines not able to operate, the Colorado governor (referred to by a Rockefeller mine manager as “our little cowboy governor”) called out the National Guard, with the Rockefellers supplying the Guard’s wages.

The miners at first thought the Guard was sent to protect them, and greeted its arrivals with flags and cheers. They soon found out the Guard was there to destroy the strike. The Guard brought strikebreakers in under cover of night, not telling them there was a strike. Guardsmen beat miners, arrested them by the hundreds, rode down with their horses parades of women in the streets of Trinidad, the central town in the area. And still the miners refused to give in. When they lasted through the cold winter of 1913– 1914, it became clear that extraordinary measures would be needed to break the strike.

In April 1914, two National Guard companies were stationed in the hills overlooking the largest tent colony of strikers, the one at Ludlow, housing a thousand men, women, children. On the morning of April 20, a machine gun attack began on the tents. The miners fired back. Their leader, a Greek named Lou Tikas, was lured up into the hills to discuss a truce, then shot to death by a company of National Guardsmen. The women and children dug pits beneath the tents to escape the gunfire. At dusk, the Guard moved down from the hills with torches, set fire to the tents, and the families fled into the hills; thirteen people were killed killed by gunfire. The following day, a telephone linesman going through the ruins of the Ludlow tent colony lifted an iron cot covering a pit in one of the tents and found the charred, twisted bodies of eleven children and two women. This became known as the Ludlow Massacre.

The news spread quickly over the country. In Denver, the United Mine Workers issued a "Call to Arms" — "Gather together for defensive purposes all arms and ammunition legally available.” Three hundred armed strikers marched from other tent colonies into the Ludlow area, cut telephone and telegraph wires, and prepared for battle. Railroad workers refused to take soldiers from Trinidad to Ludlow. At Colorado Springs, three hundred union miners walked off their jobs and headed for the Trinidad district, carrying revolvers, rifles, shotguns.

In Trinidad itself, miners attended a funeral service for the twenty-six dead at Ludlow, then walked from the funeral to a nearby building, where arms were stacked for them. They picked up rifles and moved into the hills, destroying mines, killing mine guards, exploding mine shafts. The press reported that “the hills in every direction seem suddenly to be alive with men.” In Denver, eighty-two soldiers in a company on a troop train headed for Trinidad refused to go. The press reported: “The men declared they would not engage in the shooting of women and children. They hissed the 350 men who did start and shouted imprecations at them.” Five thousand people demonstrated in the rain on the lawn in front of the state capital at Denver asking that the National Guard officers at Ludlow be tried for murder, denouncing the governor as an accessory. The Denver Cigar Makers Union voted to send five hundred armed men to Ludlow and Trinidad. Women in the United Garment Workers Union in Denver announced four hundred of their members had volunteered as nurses to help the strikers.

All over the country there were meetings, demonstrations. Pickets marched in front of the Rockefeller office at 26 Broadway, New York City. A minister protested in front of the church where Rockefeller sometimes gave sermons, and was clubbed by the police. The New York Times carried an editorial on the events in Colorado, which were now attracting international attention. The Times emphasis was not on the atrocity that had occurred, but on the mistake in tactics that had been made. Its editorial on the Ludlow Massacre began: “Somebody

blundered. . . .” Two days later, with the miners armed and in the hills of the mine district, the Times wrote: “With the deadliest weapons of civilization in the hands savage-minded men, there can be no telling to what lengths the war in Colorado will go unless it is quelled by force. . . . The President should turn his attention from Mexico long enough to take stern measures in Colorado.”

The governor of Colorado asked for federal troops to restore order, and Woodrow Wilson complied. This accomplished, the strike petered out. Congressional committees came in and took thousands of pages of testimony. The union had not won recognition. Sixty-six men, women, and children had been killed. Not one militiaman or mine guard had been indicted for crime. (pp. 347-349)

On the morning that the bodies were discovered in the tent pit at Ludlow, American warships were attacking Vera Cruz, a city on the coast of Mexico — bombarding it, occupying it, leaving a hundred Mexicans dead — because Mexico had arrested American sailors and refused to apologize to the United States with a twenty-one-gun salute. (p. 349)

... in 1907, Woodrow Wilson had said in a lecture at Columbia University: “Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. . . . the doors of the nations which are closed must be battered down.” In his 1912 campaign he said: “Our domestic markets no longer suffice, we need foreign markets.” In a memo to Bryan he described his aim as “an open door to the world,” and in 1914 he said he supported “the righteous conquest of foreign

markets.” (p. 353)

Congress passed, and Wilson signed, in June of 1917, the Espionage Act... The Espionage Act was used to imprison Americans who spoke or wrote against the war. (p. 356)

For the United States to step forward as a defender of helpless countries matched its image in American high school history textbooks, but not its record in world affairs. [It had opposed the Haitian revolution for independence from France at the start of the nineteenth century. — not in print edition] It had instigated a war with Mexico and taken half of that country. It had pretended to help Cuba win freedom from Spain, and then planted itself in Cuba with a military base, investments, and rights of intervention. It had seized Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and fought a brutal war to subjugate the Filipinos. It had “opened” Japan to its trade with gunboats and threats. It had declared an Open Door Policy in China as a means of assuring that the United States would have opportunities equal to other imperial powers in exploiting China. It had sent troops to Peking with other nations, to assert Western supremacy in China, and kept them there for over thirty years.

While demanding an Open Door in China, it had insisted (with the Monroe Doctrine and many military interventions) on a Closed Door in Latin America — that is, closed to everyone but the United States. It had engineered a revolution against Colombia and created

the “independent” state of Panama in order to build and control the Canal. It sent five thousand marines to Nicaragua in 1926 to counter a revolution, and kept a force there for seven years. It intervened in the Dominican Republic for the fourth time in 1916 and kept troops there for eight years. It intervened for the second time in Haiti in 1915 and kept troops there for nineteen years. Between 1900 and 1933, the United States intervened in Cuba four times, in Nicaragua twice, in Panama six times, in Guatemala once, in Honduras seven times. By 1924 the finances of half of the twenty Latin American states were being directed to some extent by the United States. By 1935, over half of U.S. steel and cotton exports were being sold in Latin America. (p. 399)

Just before World War I ended, in 1918, an American force of seven thousand landed at Vladivostok as part of an Allied intervention in Russia, and remained until early 1920. Five thousand more troops were landed at Archangel, another Russian port, also as part of an Allied expeditionary force, and stayed for almost a year. The State Department told Congress: “All these operations were to offset effects of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.” (pp. 399-400)

So long as Japan remained a well-behaved member of that imperial club of Great Powers who — in keeping with the Open Door Policy — were sharing the exploitation of China, the United States did not object. It had exchanged notes with Japan in 1917 saying “the Government of the United States recognizes that Japan has special interests in China.” In 1928, according to Akira Iriye (After Imperialism), American consuls in China supported the coming of Japanese troops. It was when Japan threatened potential U.S. markets by its attempted takeover of China, but especially as it moved toward the tin, rubber, and oil of Southeast Asia, that the United States became alarmed and took those measures which led to the Japanese attack: a total embargo on scrap iron, a total embargo on oil in the summer of 1941. (p. 401)

The economic aid countries would need after the war was already seen in political terms: Averell Harriman, ambassador to Russia, said in early 1944: “Economic assistance is one of the most effective weapons at our disposal to influence European political events in the direction we desire. . . .” (p. 405)

In 1960, the military budget was $ 45.8 billion — 49.7 percent of the budget. (p. 428)

A Senate report showed that the one hundred largest defense contractors, who held 67.4 percent of the military contracts, employed more than two thousand former high-ranking officers of the military. [= Amakudari] (p. 429)

From 1952 on, foreign aid was more and more obviously designed to build up military power in non-Communist countries. In the next ten years, of the $50 billion in aid granted by the United States to ninety countries, only $5 billion was for nonmilitary economic development. (p. 430)

In Guatemala, in 1954, a legally elected government was overthrown by an invasion force of mercenaries trained by the CIA at military bases in Honduras and Nicaragua and supported by four American fighter planes flown by American pilots. The invasion put into power Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who had at one time received military training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

The government that the United States overthrew was the most democratic Guatemala had ever had. The President, Jacobo Arbenz, was a left-of-center Socialist; four of the fifty-six seats in the Congress were held by Communists. What was most unsettling to American business interests was that Arbenz had expropriated 234,000 acres of land owned by United Fruit, offering compensation that United Fruit called “unacceptable.” Armas, in power, gave the land back to United Fruit, abolished the tax on interest and dividends to foreign investors, eliminated the secret ballot, and jailed thousands of political critics. (pp. 430-431)

In 1958, the Eisenhower government sent thousands of marines to Lebanon to make sure the pro-American government there was not toppled by a revolution, and to keep an armed presence in that oil-rich area. (p. 431)

In the spring of 1960, President Eisenhower secretly authorized the Central Intelligence Agency to arm and train anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Guatemala for a future invasion of Cuba. When Kennedy took office in the spring of 1961 the CIA had 1,400 exiles, armed and trained. He moved ahead with the plans, and on April 17, 1961, the CIA-trained force, with some Americans participating, landed at the Bay of Pigs on the south shore of Cuba, 90 miles from Havana. They expected to stimulate a general rising against Castro. But it was a popular regime. There was no rising. In three days, the CIA forces were crushed by Castro’s army. (p. 432)

The evidence from the Pentagon Papers is clear—that Johnson’s decision in the spring of 1968 to turn down Westmoreland’s request, to slow down for the first time the escalation of the war, to diminish the bombing, to go to the conference table, was influenced to a great extent by the actions Americans had taken in demonstrating their opposition to the war. (p. 491)

[The CIA ran a program of assassination, torture and imprisonment in Vietnam betweenn 1967 and 1971 called Operation Phoenix, headed by the present CIA director William Colby, who admitted that over 20,000 Vietnamese civilians were executed without trial. The Zinn Reader, Seven Stories Press, New York, 1997: p. 327]

... in 1970, an ITT director, John McCone, who also had been head of the CIA, told Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State, and Richard Helms, CIA director, that ITT was willing to give $1 million to help the U.S. government in its plans to overthrow the Allende government in

Chile. (p. 536)

The CIA inquiry disclosed that the CIA had gone beyond its original mission of gathering intelligence and was conducting secret operations of all kinds. For instance, back in the 1950s, it had administered the drug LSD to unsuspecting Americans to test its effects: one American scientist, given such a dose by a CIA agent, leaped from a New York hotel window to his death in the 1950s. (p. 542)

The CIA had also been involved in assassination plots against Castro of Cuba and other heads of state. It had introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971, bringing disease and then slaughter to 500,000 pigs. A CIA operative told a reporter he delivered the virus from an army base in the Canal Zone to anti-Castro Cubans. (p. 542)

When Congressman Herman Badillo introduced in Congress a proposal that required the U.S. representatives to the World Bank and other international financial institutions to vote against loans to countries that systematically violated essential rights, by the use of torture or imprisonment without trial, Carter sent a personal letter to every Congressman urging the defeat of this amendment. It won a voice vote in the House, but lost in the Senate. (p. 554)

Back in 1903 the United States had engineered a revolution against Colombia, set up the new tiny republic of Panama in Central America, and dictated a treaty giving the United States military bases, control of the Panama Canal, and sovereignty “in perpetuity.” The Carter administration in 1977, responding to anti-American protests in Panama, decided to renegotiate the treaty. The New York Times was candid about the Canal: “We stole it, and removed the incriminating evidence from our history books.” (p. 556)

The relationship of these global corporations with the poorer countries had long been an exploiting one, it was clear from U.S. Department of Commerce figures. Whereas U.S. corporations in Europe between 1950 and 1965 invested $8.1 billion and made $5.5 billion in profits, in Latin America they invested $3.8 billion and made $11.2 billion in profits, and in Africa they invested $5.2 billion and made $14.3 billion in profits. (p. 556)

The fundamental facts of maldistribution of wealth in America were clearly not going to be affected by Carter’s policies, any more than by previous administrations, whether conservative or liberal. According to Andrew Zimbalist, an American economist writing in Le Monde Diplomatique in 1977, the top 10 percent of the American population had an income thirty times that of the bottom tenth; the top 1 percent of the nation owned 33 percent of the wealth. The richest 5 percent owned 83 percent of the personally owned corporate stock. The one hundred largest corporations (despite the graduated income tax that misled people into thinking the very rich paid at least 50 percent in taxes) paid an average of 26.9 percent in taxes, and the leading oil companies paid 5.8 percent in taxes (Internal Revenue Service

figures for 1974). Indeed, 244 individuals who earned over $200,000 paid no taxes. (pp. 558-559)

In early 1979, as the crisis in Iran was intensifying, the former chief analyst on Iran for the CIA told New York Times reporter Seymour Hersh that “he and his colleagues knew of the tortures of Iranian dissenters by Savak, the Iranian secret police set up during the late 1950s by the Shah with help from the CIA.” Furthermore, he told Hersh that a senior CIA official was involved in instructing officials in Savak on torture techniques. (p. 560)

Shortly after Bush took office, a government scientist prepared testimony for a Congressional committee on the dangerous effects of industrial uses of coal and other fossil fuels in contributing to “global warming,” a depletion of the earth’s protective ozone layer. The White House changed the testimony, over the scientist’s objections, to minimize the danger (Boston Globe, October 29, 1990). Again, business worries about regulation seemed to override the safety of the public. (p. 564)

In June 1992 more than a hundred countries participated in the Earth Summit environmental conference in Brazil. Statistics showed that the armed forces of the world were responsible for two-thirds of the gases that depleted the ozone layer. But when it was suggested that the Earth Summit consider the effects of the military on environmental degradation, the United States delegation objected and the suggestion was defeated. (p. 564)

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Against the overwhelming power of corporate wealth and governmental authority, the spirit of resistance was kept alive in the early nineties, often by small-scale acts of courage and defiance. On the West Coast, a young activist named Keith McHenry and hundreds of others were arrested again and again for distributing free food to poor people without a license. They were part of a program called Food Not Bombs. More Food Not Bombs groups sprang up in communities around the country. (p. 605)

The United States was the richest country in the world, with 5 percent of the earth’s population yet consuming 30 percent of what was produced worldwide. But only a tiny portion of the American population benefited; this richest 1 percent of the population saw its wealth increase enormously starting in the late 1970s. As a result of changes in the tax structure, by 1995 that richest 1 percent had gained over $1 trillion and now owned over 40 percent of the nation’s wealth. (p. 632)

According to the business magazine Forbes, the 400 richest families owned $92 billion in 1982, but thirteen years later this had jumped to $480 billion. In the nineties, the wealth of

the 500 corporations of the Standard and Poor’s Index had increased by 335 percent. The Dow Jones average of stock prices had gone up 400 percent between 1980 and 1995, while the average wage of workers had declined in purchasing power by 15 percent. (not in 1995 edition; p. 662 in later edition?)

Three years before the terrible events of September 11, 2001, a former lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force, Robert Bowman, who had flown 101 combat missions in Vietnam, and then had become a Catholic bishop, commented on the terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In an article in the National Catholic Reporter he wrote about the roots of terrorism: We are not hated because we practice democracy, value freedom, or uphold human rights. We are hated because our government denies these things to people in Third World countries whose resources are coveted by our multinational corporations. That hatred we have sown has come back to haunt us in the form of terrorism. . . . Instead of sending our sons and daughters around the world to kill Arabs so we can have the oil under their sand, we should send them to rebuild their infrastructure, supply clean water, and feed starving children. . . . In short, we should do good instead of evil. Who would try to stop us? Who would hate us? Who would want to bomb us? That is the truth the American people need to hear. (not in 1995 edition; p. 682 in later edition?)