

PROFESSOR ZINN MEETS THOMAS PAINE

by Irwin Spiegelman

From PADL (Paine Anti-Defamation League), dedicated to protecting Thomas Paine's reputation

The People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn, since 1980, has been a major source for expressing the alternative view of American history. Zinn, in the 20th anniversary edition (p. 17), writes, "Was the bloodshed and deceit from Columbus to Cortes, Pizarro, the Puritans – a necessity for the human race to progress from savagery to civilization? ...If there *are* necessary sacrifices to be made for human progress, is it not essential to hold to the principle that those to be sacrificed must make the decision themselves?"



Zinn proceeds to excoriate the all too many conventional history texts, to which we all were exposed, which concentrate on the political and military "heroes" as well as the various elites "responsible for the extraordinary progress" our civilization has made and who have greatly benefited from murder and pillage. This history book is dedicated to native Americans, black people, both slave and free, brown peoples, the working class and to women, all of whom have suffered and continue to be oppressed by systematic discrimination and injustice. It is mainly their stories that his book relates from 1492 to 1992 and beyond.

How well does Thomas Paine fare in Howard Zinn's world view? Among Revolutionary War notables, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Samuel Adams and John Adams, Paine takes top honors, with some criticism from Zinn.

This edition of PADL looks at Paine through the eyes of an important critic of conventional American history. There are four references to Paine in *The People's History*.

The first lauds Paine as one of the leaders of mechanics and other workers in Philadelphia to rally in favor of the Pennsylvania Constitution, thought to be the most progressive up to that time. According to historian Gary B. Nash, with Paine among its leaders, they "launched a full-scale attack on wealth and even on the right to acquire unlimited private property." Zinn points out that these workers, like their counterparts throughout the colonies, were as much upset by their meager rewards compared to the wealthiest colonists as they were by British rule.

The second reference concerns *Common Sense*, with a few of Paine's best comments such as, "Society in every state is a blessing, but Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil." Zinn is impressed and sees it as a strong argument for independence. From Paine's powerful attack on monarchy, Zinn chose Paine's case of William the Conqueror imposing himself and his descendants' rule on unwilling Britons: "A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti... is in plain terms a very

paltry rascally original. It certainly has no divinity in it."

There are Paine quotes on the questions of colonial dependence on Britain in trade; Paine makes short work of that and fires off a salvo showing Britain to be a hindrance toward good relations with Europe because of Britain's chronic quarrels and wars with its neighbors.

Zinn's last Paine quote in this section is the powerful summary sentence, "Everything that is right and reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain and the weeping voice of nature cries 'TIS TIME TO PART.'"

The third reference starts with, "Paine himself came out of 'the lower orders' of England". Zinn goes on, "But his great concern seems to have been to speak for a middle group." He quotes Paine, "There is an extent of riches, as well as an extreme of poverty, which by harrowing the circles of a man's acquaintance, lessens his opportunities of general knowledge." Zinn can be challenged on this point by arguing that Paine is referring to the most extremes of wealth and poverty and that the overwhelming population fell into Paine's middle group.

On the controversy over the adoption of the US Constitution, Paine was on the side of urban workers who favored a strong central government. Zinn concludes, "He seemed to believe that such a government could represent some great common interest. In this sense, he lent himself perfectly to the myth of the Revolution -- that it was on behalf of a united people." Zinn's title for Chapter 5 is *A Kind of Revolution*.

Zinn's severest criticism of Paine comes with his association with Robert Morris, one of the wealthiest men in Pennsylvania, and Paine's approval of the formation of the Bank of North America. The details show that Paine, in 1780, as the clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly, read a desperate letter from George Washington seeking immediate funds for the troops encamped for the winter at Morristown NJ. Paine immediately and publicly contributed \$500 to a relief fund and met with financial leaders, including Robert Morris, to get the prosperous to contribute. The appeal was so successful that the financing by the Bank of North America went forward to support the war. It is agreed that the Bank helped to back the war effort, until France responded with funds to carry the war to victory. (Remember Paine accompanying Col. John Laurens on his successful trip to France for that funding.) Later Paine entered into an agreement with Robert Morris, Robert Livingston and George Washington to write in favor of states like Rhode Island to tax its citizens and help fund the war effort. Details of Paine's transaction with Robert Morris can be found in Moncure Conway's biography.

The last reference is found in chapter 6, *The Intimately Oppressed*. Zinn mentions, "Ideas of female equality were in the air during and after the Revolution. Tom Paine spoke out for the equal rights of women." In the same paragraph,

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Mary Wollstonecraft is mentioned as responding to Edmund Burke's, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and to Burke's shocking comment that, "a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order."

Here, Zinn seems to be referring to an article, *An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex*, in the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, August, 1775, edited by Paine. Moncure Conway, Paine biographer, called it the earliest plea for women in America. Later research found

that the article was written by a Frenchman, but certainly Paine gets high marks for publishing it.

In conclusion, Zinn meets Paine and Paine is admired, but Zinn has a deep problem, that Paine would recognize, how America and most of the world can continue down a path where human rights take a back seat to corporate and individual enrichment in the age of climate change, wars and belligerence, and extreme impoverishment.
