

## A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES: 1492-PRESENT

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### AFTERWORD

I am often asked how I came to write this book. One answer is that my wife Roslyn urged me to write it, and continued to urge me at those times when, daunted by the magnitude of the project, I wanted to abandon it. Another is that the circumstances of my own life (which, as I now write, has spanned a fourth of the nation's history -- a startling thought) demanded of me that I try to fashion a new kind of history. By that I mean a history different from what I had learned in college and in graduate school and from what I saw in the history texts given to students all over the country.

When I set out to write the book, I had been teaching history and what is grandiosely called "political science" for twenty years. Half of that time I was involved in the civil rights movement in the South (mostly while teaching at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia). And then there were ten years of activity against the war in Vietnam. These experiences were hardly a recipe for neutrality in the teaching and writing of history.

But my partisanship was undoubtedly shaped even earlier, by my upbringing in a family of working-class immigrants in New York, by my three years as a shipyard worker, and by my Air Force duty as a bombardier in the European theater (a strange word for that -- "theater") in the second World War. That was all before I went to college under the GI Bill of Rights and began to study history.

By the time I began teaching and writing, I had no illusions about "objectivity," if that meant avoiding a point of view. I knew that a historian (or a journalist, or anyone telling a story) was forced to choose, out of an infinite number of facts, what to present, what to omit. And that decision inevitably would reflect, whether consciously or not, the interests of the historian.

There is a certain drumbeat of scolding one hears these days, about the need for students to learn facts. "Our young people are not being taught facts," said presidential candidate Robert Dole (and candidates are always so scrupulous about facts) to a gathering of American Legionnaires. I was reminded of the character in Dickens' *Hard Times*, the pedant Gradgrind, who admonished a younger teacher: "Teach nothing but facts, facts, facts."

But there is no such thing as a pure fact, innocent of interpretation. Behind every fact presented to the world -- by a teacher, a writer, anyone -- is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact is important, and that other facts, omitted, are not important.

There were themes of profound importance to me which I found missing in the orthodox histories that dominated American culture. The consequence of those omissions has been not simply to give a distorted view of the past but, more important, to mislead us all about the present.

For instance, there is the issue of class. It is pretended that, as in the Preamble to the Constitution, it is "we the people" who wrote that document, rather than fifty-five privileged white males whose class interest required a strong central government. That use of government for class purposes, to serve the needs of the wealthy and powerful, has continued throughout American history, down to the present day. It is disguised by language that suggests all of us -- rich and poor and middle class -- have a common interest.

Thus, the state of the nation is described in universal terms. The novelist Kurt Vonnegut invented the term "granfalloon" to describe a great bubble that must be punctured to see the complexity inside. When the president declares happily that "our economy is sound," he will not acknowledge that it is not at all sound for 40 or 50 million people who are struggling to survive, although it may be moderately sound for many in the middle class, and extremely sound for the richest 1 percent of the nation who own 40 percent of the nation's wealth.

Labels are given to periods in our history which reflect the well-being of one class and ignore the rest. When I was going through the files of Fiorello LaGuardia, who as a Congressman in the twenties represented East Harlem, I read the letters of desperate housewives, their husbands out of work, their children hungry, unable to pay their rent -- all this in that period known as "the Jazz Age," the "Roaring Twenties."

What we learn about the past does not give us absolute truth about the present, but it may cause us to look deeper than the glib statements made by political leaders and the "experts" quoted in the press.

Class interest has always been obscured behind an all-encompassing veil called "the national interest." My own war experience, and the history of all those military interventions in which the United States was engaged, made me skeptical when I heard people in high political office invoke "the national interest" or "national security" to justify their policies. It was with such justifications that Truman initiated a "police action" in Korea that killed several million people, that Johnson and Nixon carried out a war in Indochina in which perhaps 3 million people died, that Reagan invaded Grenada, Bush attacked Panama and then Iraq, and Clinton bombed Iraq again and again.

Is there a "national interest" when a few people decide on war, and huge numbers of others -- here and abroad -- are killed or crippled as a result of such a decision? Should citizens not ask in whose interest are we doing what we are doing? Then why not, I came to think, tell the story of wars not through the eyes of the generals and diplomats but from the viewpoints of the GIs, of the parents who received the black-bordered telegrams, even of "the enemy."

What struck me as I began to study history was how nationalist fervor -- inculcated from childhood on by pledges of allegiance, national anthems, flags waving and rhetoric blowing -- permeated the educational systems of all countries, including our own. I wonder now how the foreign policies of the United States would look if we wiped out the national boundaries of the world, at least in our minds, and thought of all children everywhere as our own. Then we could never drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or napalm on Vietnam, or wage war anywhere, because wars, especially in our time, are always wars against children, indeed our children.

And then there is, much as we would want to erase it, the ineradicable issue of race. It did not occur to me, when I first began to immerse myself in history, how badly twisted was the teaching and writing of history by its submersion of nonwhite people. Yes, Indians were there, and then gone. Black people were visible when slaves, then free and invisible. It was a white man's history.

From first grade to graduate school, I was given no inkling that the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World initiated a genocide, in which the indigenous population of Hispaniola was annihilated. Or that this was just the first stage of what was presented as a benign expansion of the new nation (Louisiana "Purchase," Florida "Purchase," Mexican "Cession"), but which involved the violent expulsion

of Indians, accompanied by unspeakable atrocities, from every square mile of the continent, until there was nothing to do with them but herd them into reservations.

I was invited, sometime in 1998, to speak at a symposium in Boston's historic Faneuil Hall, on the Boston Massacre. I said I would be glad to do that, so long as I did not have to deal with the Boston Massacre. And so my talk was not about the killing of five colonists by British troops in 1770. I thought that had been given an inordinate amount of attention for over two hundred years, because it served a certain patriotic function. Instead, I wanted to talk about the many massacres of nonwhite people in our history, which would not reinforce patriotic pride but remind us of the long legacy of racism in our country, still smoldering and needing attention.

Every American schoolchild learns about the Boston Massacre. But who learns about the massacre of 600 men, women, and children of the Pequot tribe in New England in 1637? Or the massacre -- in the midst of the Civil War -- of hundreds of Indian families at Sand Creek, Colorado, by U.S. soldiers? Or the military attack by 200 U.S. cavalrymen in 1870 which wiped out a sleeping camp of Piegan Indians in Montana?

It was not until I joined the faculty of Spelman College, a college for black women in Atlanta, Georgia, that I began to read the African-American historians who never appeared on my reading lists in graduate school (W.E.B. Du Bois, Rayford Logan, Lawrence Reddick, Horace Mann Bond, John Hope Franklin). Nowhere in my history education had I learned about the massacres of black people that took place again and again, amid the silence of a national government pledged, by the Constitution, to protect equal rights for all.

For instance, in East St. Louis in 1917 there occurred one of the many "race riots" that took place in what our white-oriented history books called the "Progressive Era." There, white workers, angered by the influx of black workers, killed perhaps 200 people, provoking an angry article by W.E.B. Du Bois called "The Massacre of East St. Louis," and causing the performing artist Josephine Baker to say: "The very idea of America makes me shake and tremble and gives me nightmares."

I wanted, in writing this book, to awaken a greater consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance. But even as I tried to make up for what I saw as serious omissions, I nevertheless neglected groups in American society that had always been missing from orthodox histories. I became aware of this, and embarrassed by it, when people wrote to me after reading *A People's History*, praising the book but pointing gently (sometimes not so gently) to its shortcomings.

It was perhaps my stronger connection to the East Coast of the United States that caused me to ignore the large numbers of Latino and Latina people who lived in California and the Southwest, and their struggles for justice. Readers who want to learn more about that might look into these extraordinary books: *De Colores Means All of Us* by Elizabeth Martinez; *Zapata's Disciple: Essays* by Martin Espada; *Aztlan and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War*, edited by George Mariscal.

And I suppose, it was my own sexual orientation that accounted for my minimal treatment of the issue of gay and lesbian rights. I tried, when a new edition appeared in 1995, to make up for this. But readers will have to look further to get a more substantial account of the remarkable change in the national culture that took place when men and women who were "queer" (a pejorative term for some people; an honorable one for others) asserted their humanity boldly, courageously, to the larger society.

As we pass from one century to another, one millennium to another, we would like to think that history itself is transformed as dramatically as the calendar. However, it rushes on, as it always did, with two forces racing toward the future, one splendidly uniformed, the other ragged but inspired.

There is the past and its continuing horrors: violence, war, prejudices against those who are different, outrageous monopolization of the good earth's wealth by a few, political power in the hands of liars and murderers, the building of prisons instead of schools, the poisoning of the press and the entire culture by money. It is easy to become discouraged observing this, especially since this is what the press and television insist that we look at, and nothing more.

But there is also (though much of this is kept from us, to keep us intimidated and without hope) the bubbling of change under the surface of obedience: the growing revulsion against the endless wars (I think of the Russian women in the nineties, demanding their country end its military intervention in Chechnya, as did Americans during the Vietnam war); the insistence of women all over the world that they will no longer tolerate abuse and subordination -- we see, for instance, the new international movement against female genital mutilation, and the militancy of welfare mothers against punitive laws. There is civil disobedience against the military machine, protest against police brutality directed especially at people of color.

In the United States, we see the educational system, a burgeoning new literature, alternative radio stations, a wealth of documentary films outside the mainstream, even Hollywood itself and sometimes television -- compelled to recognize the growing multiracial character of the nation. Yes, we have in this country, dominated by corporate wealth and military power and two antiquated political parties, what a fearful conservative characterized as "a permanent adversarial culture" challenging the present, demanding a new future.

It is a race in which we can all choose to participate, or just to watch. But we should know that our choice will help determine the outcome.

I think of the words of the poet Shelley, recited by women garment workers in New York to one another at the start of the twentieth century.

Rise like lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number!

Shake your chains to earth, like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you --

Ye are many; they are few!