KEVIN MATTSON

History Lesson

Those who don't know history are doomed to distort it—and our political discourse.

Discussed in this essay

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES BY HOWARD ZINN • HARPER PERENNIAL MODERN CLASSICS • 2005 • 768 PAGES • $18.95

THE STRANGE CAREER OF JIM CROW BY C. VANN WOODWARD • OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2001 • 272 PAGES • $15.95

In the run-up to the 2006 elections, the past became the present political weapon of choice. Everything in politics, it seems, has a historical analogy. Consider first a speech this past summer by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld before a gathering of the American Legion. It revolved around an analogy between the appeasement of fascism in the 1930s and the critics of the Iraq war. Both then and today, he said, appeasers hold a belief that "if only the growing threats...could be accommodated, then the carnage...could be avoided." Or take a recent column by *Slate* Editor Jacob Weisberg that compared Ned Lamont's victory over Joe Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic senatorial primary to the 1972 choice of George McGovern, a "naïve and honorable anti-war idealist," as the Democratic presidential candidate. McGovern lost the general election in a landslide and left behind a lasting impression that Democrats were weak on foreign affairs. Weisberg intoned that,

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therefore, Lamont's nomination would have a similarly "huge and lasting negative impact on the Democratic Party." Or recall how the death of Iraqi civilians at Haditha was touted as a modern-day My Lai, how Democrats are told to be more like Harry Truman, and how George W. Bush is scolded for being too much like Woodrow Wilson.

Just as the stakes for the future of America seem to have become greater, the country has been looking back as it tries to move forward. Yet in this respect, hindsight is hardly 20-20. Neither Rumsfeld's nor Weisberg's historical analogies, for example, work very well when put to even quick examination: Adolf Hitler was expanding throughout Central Europe during the late 1930s, while Saddam Hussein had been sufficiently contained after the first Gulf war and had nothing to do with the attacks of September 11. Lamont was not, as McGovern was, running for president at the height of a conservative backlash, but rather for the Senate in a deeply blue state and in a political party that, unlike with Vietnam, is not the key instigator of the war in question.

But if such analogies are so specious, why do politicians and pundits continue to deploy them? Simply put, because they can. Today the public, even the educated public, has little knowledge of history, or even an appreciation of history as anything other than a grab bag of unrelated facts to be picked from as one sees fit. These days, who knows much about the ins and outs of British appeasement or McGovern's 1972 campaign (hardly ancient history)? But even in their ignorance, audiences are still sufficiently impressed by history's power that even the weakest analogies provide immediate *faux* expertise, an instant credibility. Thus history is both poorly understood and everywhere present; we shape our public discourse with a discipline we don't understand.

And where are the professional historians who are trained to understand the past and could scrutinize such claims? They're in academia, churning out esoteric articles that move fast onto resumes but rarely into public debate. Go to recent issues of the *American Historical Review* and you'll find articles like "Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France," "Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics," and "The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1920"—and those are just the titles. If you make it through them, you'll face the back of the journal where there are reviewed, literally, hundreds of books with similarly arcane titles, all of which give a sense of the overwhelming amount of scholarship out there on topics that few people know exist, let alone care about.

To be sure, there is something to be said for professionalism; professions, after all, help members learn the skills of research, objectivity, and balance. But

they also press members to take their cues from other professionals, not the public. Today historians learn to frame their writing from the research concerns (including theoretical ones) delimited by the academy. To be "presentist," to care about what the public is thinking and worried about and to try to shed historical light on such concerns, is to perform career suicide. Granted, there are a few noteworthy exceptions of academic historians who have written works of political significance: Dan T. Carter, Michael Kazin, and Alan Brinkley come to mind. Yet no junior faculty member will be serving his or her quest for tenure following such a path.

Four months before his then-boss, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. argued in the *Atlantic* that when scholars abandon engaged history and leave public life behind, they empower "prophetic historians" who replace complexity with a big overarching idea (Schlesinger had in mind Marxism). Today, scholars are leaving behind the public world not to communist theory but to the History Channel, where the imperative of entertainment trumps veracity, where shows about absurd conspiracy theories run alongside more serious fare, all formatted to work in between commercials. Or they leave it behind to blockbuster historians—think David McCullough, Doris Kearns Goodwin, or the recently deceased Stephen Ambrose—whose books, though widely bought, lack analytical power and critical insight. But most worrisome of all (and here is where Schlesinger was most prescient), professional historians have left a void to be filled by radical historians, who eschew nuance and objectivity in favor of simplistic morality tales.

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It wasn't always this way. In the postwar era, there was a generation of historians—like C. Vann Woodward, Henry Steele Commager, Richard Hofstadter, and Schlesinger himself—who were consummate professionals and engaged in the important matters of the day. These historians benefited from the stringent demands of professional objectivity, a tradition that had solidified during the early years of the twentieth century with the growth of the modern university as well as the founding of numerous graduate programs in history and professional associations like the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. Yet historians like Woodward, Commager, and Hofstadter did not believe that objectivity and professionalism required locking themselves up in an ivory tower—just the opposite. Objectivity and the broad perspective

that a training in history provided made these intellectuals' engagement in public life an imperative. Now, as professionalization and objectivity—and the cruel realities of limited academic jobs for young historians—exert more pressures than before, we are forgetting the balancing act carried out by a previous generation. Fewer and fewer historians have the skills or ambition—let alone incentives—to make history speak to a wider public world. This leaves public engagement to those who are willing to cheapen the historian's craft and play political football with the past. Both our understanding of history and our public discussion are the worse for it.

Ironically, the person who best embodies this unfortunate transformation of history is arguably the most famous American historian alive: Howard Zinn. As Michael Kazin recently pointed out in *Dissent*, Zinn's most popular book, *A People's History of the United States*, "has gone through five editions and multiple printings, been assigned in thousands of college courses, sold more than a million copies, and made the author something of a celebrity." The book even had a cameo in the Oscar-winning film *Good Will Hunting*. Zinn—who earned his Ph.D. from Columbia—cut his teeth in the early days of the civil rights movement while a professor at Spelman College, an all-female African-American institution in Atlanta. As he became more involved in the movement and active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Zinn, now professor emeritus at Boston University, made a decision about the way he would "do" history in the future. "There was never, for me as a teacher and writer," he later explained, "an obsession with 'objectivity,' which I considered neither possible nor desirable." For Zinn, writing history was synonymous with doing politics. As he states in *A People's History*, there is an inevitable "taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history." In other words, history can never be the disinterested pursuit of truth but is rather a radical project, from the very beginning an exercise in spin rather than scholarship.

Riding a wave of "social history" that overtook academe in the wake of the 1960s, Zinn told stories about people neglected in more traditional political and intellectual histories. Instead of the Founding Fathers, readers of *A People's History* learn about the urban working class during the American Revolution, Native American resistance to white settlers moving West, and a handful of slave revolts in the South. Telling these stories proved a form of political therapy for Zinn—a way of cheering on ordinary citizens for future political battles. "If history is to be creative," Zinn explained, "it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally

to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past's fugitive moments of compassion."

To be fair, there is nothing wrong—and quite a few things right—about bringing to light heretofore unappreciated aspects of American history, whether they involve working people, women, or minorities. But Zinn is less interested in the episodes themselves as he is in stringing them together to tell a sweeping, ideology-heavy narrative that leaves no room for contingency or nuance. Zinn's narrative in *A People's History* is rather depressing. It's a story of failed struggles in which the always virtuous "people" are beaten by a system that seems conspiratorial in both its reach and its ability to smother dissent. Turn-of-the-century Populists are co-opted, the socialist movement a generation later disintegrates, and the radical unions like the Wobblies and Colorado's Ludlow strikers dissolve—all at the hands of the ever-present, ever-pernicious "American system," the "most ingenious system of control in world history." Crackpot as it may sound, this is the face of American history, at least to millions of non-historians. He has been profiled in *Rolling Stone*; his latest book, *Voices from a People's History,* has been adapted into a play; and at one point Fox (of all places) was considering a TV series based on *A People's History*.

Zinn's popular influence and the fact that he's widely read by left-wing activists who share his view of the world have evinced a predictable reaction from conservatives. Recent books like *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* (replete with cartoons and pull-out quotes) and *A Patriot's History of the United States* by University of Dayton Professor Larry Schweikart have done well in sales by simply countering Zinn's polemics. But Zinn's popularity hasn't provided the right a model for their own work as much as a bull's eye, an excuse to demagogue the discipline and debase the possibility of history providing a credible check to its right-wing agenda. Rather than ignoring Zinn, they place him at the center of the American historiography, just to show how widespread his approach has become. "Chomsky is read, imbibed, followed, by countless people, many of them young. Zinn is merely the author of the top-selling, most widely assigned U.S.-history textbook. Who's to say these men aren't mainstream?," asked Jay Nordlinger in the *National Review*. And once Zinn is accepted as the model historian, it's easy for the right to prepare the necessary takedown.

I recently witnessed firsthand how the right uses history to further its own agenda while writing a biography of Upton Sinclair, a socialist and hero to Zinn. In December 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a man bought a bundle of Sinclair's letters at an auction; in one letter Sinclair admitted to knowing that Sacco and Vanzetti—two Italian immigrant anarchists put to death for murder in 1927 and lionized by the left—were guilty, but that he decided nevertheless

to write a book that could still help their "cause." The right-wing pundit Jonah Goldberg pounced on the story, declaring that the episode exposed the "clay feet of liberal saints," including historians, who had written Sinclair into the canon of historical American heroes. Goldberg quickly compared Sinclair's reaction to the Sacco and Vanzetti case to Al Sharpton's own use of Tawana Brawley (she claimed that six white men raped her and later was found to have lied about it) in New York in the 1980s. Goldberg didn't even bother to discuss (or perhaps even read) the book that Sinclair had mentioned in the letter. (If he had, he would have found that the book presented a grayer picture of the case than Goldberg made it seem.) But such journalistic responsibility and historical accuracy would have slowed down the mad dash for the op-ed that could scream out: Liberal history is a lie! And with people like Howard Zinn supposedly at its helm, who would disagree? Thus Zinn's approach to history provides both a target and a method to those who would profit from the debasement of serious history—those who, like Goldberg, can only win ideological arguments by delegitimizing those who could prove him wrong. Considering all this, it's no wonder historians stay out of the public sphere and content themselves with obscure articles that no one reads. Why become fodder in this debate? Better to treat the past as past and leave the political discussions to loud-mouthed pundits whose hatchet jobs rarely illuminate the past, let alone the present.

Fortunately, things do not have to be this way. There was a time, after all, when historians did, in fact, see an obligation to become engaged with the world, even as they maintained an equal obligation to the high standards of truth-seeking in their discipline. And, not coincidentally, this was also the time when a raft of historians actually did make great contributions to the public good. Consider C. Vann Woodward, author of *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Sometimes called the "Bible of the Civil Rights Movement," *Strange Career* came out a few months after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1955, and like Zinn's *A People's History*, is still in print and read today. A slim, accessible book intended for the nonacademic public (though published by a university press), it documented how segregation and disenfranchisement arose in the late-nineteenth-century American South. The book grew out of work Woodward did for Thurgood Marshall—then the lead NAACP lawyer on the *Brown* case—in June 1953. The NAACP contacted Woodward about helping to garner historical evidence for the case and to write a paper showing that "the drive for complete immediate equality for the newly freed Negro" during Reconstruction "was caught up in a complex economic, historical and political situation."

A lesser historian might have written a potted history, picking and choosing the elements of the past that served the plaintiffs' cause. But Woodward didn't grab at history the way pundits and radicals do today. He came to his story after an established career in Southern history, having written three major books on the topic, and he sought to prove the case's merit using the same standards he brought to his previous work. When he explained the historical rise of segregation, he knew enough to explain his story's complexity and contingency. Segregation arose, he argued, out of a clashing set of views on race relations after Reconstruction came to an end; some activists called for a cross-racial alliance of the poor (the Populist movement) while the Ku Klux Klan advocated and practiced an extra-legal race war. Though Woodward was clearly an opponent of segregation and racism, his story didn't unfold as a morality play of good versus evil but rather as a clash of "real choices," some less harmful than others. He explained: "The policies of proscription, segregation, and disenfranchisement that are often described as immutable 'folkways' of the South, impervious alike to legislative reform and armed intervention, are of a more recent origin." Though scholars have subsequently challenged some of the book's arguments, it is still read and used in history classes today.

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Woodward's real contribution, though, was to show that the central philosophical pivots of history—the intersection of social, economic, and political trends with the contingency inherent in all human endeavor—had great relevance for the present. Woodward didn't seek facile analogies; he sought a clear and thorough understanding of past events as a defining factor of the present. And in doing good history, he made a significant contribution to the NAACP's success in the *Brown* decision. Woodward's role in the *Brown* case contrasts nicely with Zinn's role as a movement figure. First, and most obviously, Woodward knew that movements couldn't succeed without help, including that from the highest rungs of the American judiciary branch of government. Government wasn't a foe, constantly foiling the wishes of the "people," but a tool for accomplishing public ends that could not be accomplished voluntarily. Nor did Woodward romanticize the civil rights movement; instead, he consistently debated with it about strategy. Finally, Woodward showed how the past was complex and made up of the acts of varied players making choices that were in no way inevitable; he would have seen as silly the telling of a narrative in which always virtuous people battle an always villainous power elite. Though he

certainly sided with those who wanted to achieve justice, he didn't toss aside the importance of scrutinizing the past in order to accomplish a better world.

Woodward wasn't alone. He belonged to a generation of historians who benefited from the stringent demands of professionalization and objectivity yet balanced these demands with an engagement in public life. Two of his friends, Schlesinger and Hofstadter, captured this balancing act in different ways. In 1949, Schlesinger authored *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, in which he employed his talents as a historian and writer to chart out the contours of a realistic and tough-minded liberalism ready for the present-day battles against communism and the reaction to it. Beyond that, Schlesinger helped found the influential liberal organization Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and eventually became an adviser to President John Kennedy. In response to those who criticized his partisan engagement, Schlesinger pointed out that he learned about the dynamics of political power and difficult political choices made in the past (the subject matter of his own books about history) from serving the White House. "Practical experience may yield qualities of insight hard to achieve in the library," he argued. And yet at the same time, he never abandoned "objectivity," which he believed was an ideal "towards which the historian must constantly strive."

Hofstadter didn't engage power the way Schlesinger did, although he did march in civil rights protests. Yet his books were directly relevant to the politics of the day. In "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," he might explore fears about "Illuminism" in the late eighteenth century and the "anti-Masonic movement of the late 1820's and 1830's," but he still made it around to explaining the 1964 presidential run by Barry Goldwater. *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* plumbed the evangelical spirit found in the "religious revivals" and "Great Awakenings" of the past, but its story helped explain why Senator Joseph McCarthy could have success attacking the "bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouth." A tradition of attacking intellectual elites, Hofstadter pointed out, proved fertile soil for the American right. Both Hofstadter and Schlesinger wrote histories that drew from their engagement in public life and contributed to it.

The legacy of Woodward, Schlesinger, and Hofstadter doesn't offer all the answers. It's easier to tell young historians to get engaged than for them to cut through the vines of career-building imperatives to do so. Nonetheless, this group should be more of a model for their descendants. To them, history could not provide therapy for a movement, ignore complexity, or serve up quick comparisons. Woodward, to name one, was engaged, but his

ironic disposition brought needed perspective to that commitment. This is what made him a "liberal," in the deepest sense of that term.

Woodward's measured form of engagement is no easier to reconstitute today outside academe. Our culture nurtures instantaneous debate and over-the-top diatribes, rather than thoughtful rumination. But this is precisely what makes Woodward's legacy all the more important. As the liberal historian Alan Brinkley (sounding conservative to some, perhaps) pointed out in his book *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, "Reminding our personality-obsessed and result-oriented culture that there are forces shaping our world beyond the actions and characters of individuals—and that we will be more successful if we adjust our expectations and our goals to the reality of those forces, and to the difficulty of our fully understanding them—is one of the things [historians] are best equipped to do." Our culture could use reminding of this right now.

We won't get there if we look to history the way Rumsfeld and Zinn do. And we won't get there if professional historians continue to hibernate in academia. We'll only get there if historians start to make their work relevant to public debate while pursuing the best qualities of their craft—objectivity and complexity. By showing citizens that there is a more fruitful way to turn to the past, we might do a service to our future public discussions in more ways than one. **D**