

The Fourth of July Like You've Never Seen it Before

by Mike Ferner

This year, sit back with your favorite beverage, prop up your feet, and open your head to consider Independence Day in a whole new way.

Previously, a POCLAD article about the American Revolution would usually relate how the democratic promises of the Declaration were left unfulfilled at the war's end and a very undemocratic constitution was adopted six years later.

We would likely list how the new constitution abandoned the ideals stated in the Declaration such as: "all men (sic) are created equal" and have unassailable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We would cite that:

- Slaves weren't included in "We the People," they were only the property of their owners, much like a mule or a bale of cotton. Because this human property, unlike bales of cotton or mules, could plan to run away, particular attention was paid to securing it. Any person "held to service or labor in one state...escaping to another...shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due." ([Art. IV, sec. 2](#))

- To appease Southerners interested in gaining the maximum number of seats in the new House of Representatives, the Fathers of Our Country declared, in writing, that these "other persons" (slaves) would each count as three-fifths of a human. ([Art. I, sec. 2](#))
- Women did not have the right to vote, nor did Catholics and Jews in some states. White, Protestant, men had to own qualifying amounts of property. Thus, [only about 6%](#) of the new nation's population was eligible to vote in the first presidential election and [only 1.3%, or 38,818](#) people actually did.
- Those 38,818 people didn't actually vote for a presidential candidate, but for "electors" who pledged to vote for certain candidates and even then, in four states [legislatures picked](#) the presidential electors, not voting citizens.
- State legislatures, not citizens, chose U.S. Senators until the Constitution was [amended in 1913](#).

Clearly, there are reasons to ask what the Founders of Our Country were up to and what the fireworks are all about.

But this year, let's investigate a further question: was a war the only or even the best way to achieve what we now see was more limited than what we were taught?

Who better to proffer that question than the people's historian, Howard Zinn?

In articles and speeches, including [this one](#) in Wellfleet, Massachusetts in September, 2009, Zinn provided his final, giant contribution just four months before he died, by examining what he called America's "Three Holy Wars," specifically the Revolution, the Civil War and World War Two, "Three wars in American history that are untouchable, uncriticizable..." as he characterized them.

His theme is that we need to do something never done in history textbooks: put each of these wars on its own balance sheet – costs on one side, benefits on the other – and then make a judgment.

If something's unquestioned, it means we're not thinking about it, Zinn said. But the historian was quick to add that his reason for doing so is not to learn what 'really happened' in the past. "The

past is past,” he exclaimed. “The important thing is what does it tell us about today...and about what we might do in the world? There’s a present and a future reason for going into the past.”

Without that examination, he said, we and our grandchildren will be prone to accept wars as possibly good. “Because once you have a history of ‘good wars’ fought for good causes to point to, you have a model...it’s possible to have good wars. And maybe this is one of them”

If you question the good wars you undermine the possibility of having a good war.

The acknowledged “bad wars” like Vietnam and Iraq are justified by pointing to the “good war.” Words like “We mustn’t appease Saddam Hussein. Munich. Chamberlain. Ho Chi Minh is another Hitler,” come back to us in the buildup to every war. They suggest that maybe we need another “good war.”

Typically we only look at one side of the balance sheet: what was gained – in this case independence from Britain – and ignore the cost. Rarely do we hear how many people were killed in the Revolution. “We won independence. It’s insignificant.”

So how many were killed? Perhaps 25,000 or even 50,000. “You probably know by now that casualty figures in war are very crude,” Zinn remarked. “There’ll be disagreements up to a million – how many people died in Vietnam? I think two million. Or maybe three million. We’re not sure.”

25,000 is not many soldiers killed, he added. It’s less than half the

number of U.S. troops killed in Viet Nam. But what would 25,000 mean relative to today’s population? 2,500,000 dead. Today, would we think it’s worth sacrificing two and a half million people? “Might you not say, ‘Well, we want independence, but is there another way?’”

If we do that for each of these “good wars” at least then you have an honest balance sheet and you can make a decision. “Especially if none of those 2.5 million people are related to you,” Zinn said.

Beyond casualties, there are other factors that should go on the balance sheet? For example, who gains from victory in war?

With a smile the historian said, “Governments would like us to believe we all gain from a war. That’s not necessarily true. Did black slaves gain from the Revolutionary War? Slavery before the war. Slavery after the war. You would think blacks would rush to the colors if they were fighting for their freedom, but Washington didn’t want blacks in the army. Washington, Madison, Jefferson, all slave owners, aren’t going to promise freedom. The British did. Only after the British began to enlist blacks did the Continental Army slowly enlist blacks.”

(Indeed, POCLAD and others argue that an important motivation for the Revolution happened in England in 1772, when Lord Mansfield ruled in *Somerset v Stewart* that a slave, [James Somerset](#), who had escaped after being taken to England by his master, could not be forced back into slavery.)

“What about the people already here, the Indians,” Zinn asked? With independence, the colonists won the ability to go westward, beyond the Appalachian line set by the British in the Proclamation of 1763. “Not because they were being nice, because they didn’t want trouble.”

So what do the Indians gain? It’s worse than nothing. After the Revolution that line was wiped out and we spent the next century taking over the rest of the continent, Zinn reminded his listeners.

Did working people and poor people benefit from the Revolution? Did they rush to Washington’s army? “No. Poor people had to be conscripted. They could avoid conscription by paying a fee, a practice begun with the Revolution that was carried over to the Civil War. Poor white people weren’t eager to join the army, but they were promised land if they won. And much like today, a young man from a tough background, not knowing what the future will bring, might join the army. You get a uniform, a gun, some status, maybe some medals, a little land.”

After they joined, many found they weren’t treated well. They found the officers got good clothes and shoes and food and paid a salary. As a result there were mutinies. “How many of you learned that in school,” Zinn asked, adding that all through his education up to a Ph.D., he didn’t.

“Thousands mutinied. Washington had to deal with it. He made concessions. And when smaller mutinies happened, he rounded up the leaders and had them shot by their fellow mutineers.

All this is to say that the Revolutionary War, like all wars, was a class war. But we're not supposed to bring that up. "We're all one class, all one patriotic body. No. Wars affect us all differently," Zinn reminded.

After the Revolution, in Western Massachusetts, the land given to veterans was taxed beyond their ability to pay. Confiscations began and so did Shays Rebellion in 1786. Thousands rebelled and an army raised by the rich merchants of Boston put it down, Zinn related. "But it raised the question for whom was the war fought? Who was betrayed by it?" And the next year the constitutional convention convened to give us a strong central government. The founding fathers were worried about Shay's Rebellion and Massachusetts wasn't the only place in revolt. [Gen. Henry Knox wrote to warn Washington](#) that thousands were beginning to demand an equal share of the wealth gained by the Revolution.

In the shadow of Shay's and in fear of future rebellions, the Constitutional Convention convened in Philadelphia in 1787. A strong central government was set up "not just because it's nice to have a strong central government," Zinn said, alluding to history text explanations, "but to be able to suppress rebellions" by workers and slaves, and to protect settlers moving into Indian territory. (It should be noted that conventioners met originally to amend our original constitution, the Articles of Confederation. Once together, however, they ditched the Articles with the more top-down and property-friendly constitution that we're familiar with today.)

Then Zinn asked a key question about our first "Holy War:" could we have put something good on the positive side of the balance sheet without that human cost? Could we have won independence without a war?

"If something has happened a certain way in history, we assume that's the only way it could have unfolded," he said. But unless we use our imagination, "we're going to be stuck doing the same thing over and over."

In this particular case, we have more than just imagination to guide us.

The year before Lexington and Concord, farmers in 90% of Massachusetts, everywhere except Boston, had nonviolently driven out British officials. Zinn cites the work of historian Ray Raphael, author of "The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord," describing how nonviolent action made that state ungovernable. "When a place becomes impossible to govern even imperial powers withdraw because they can't control the situation," Zinn explained.

To close this POCLAD examination of Independence Day, it's worth quoting Raphael at length, from the [Journal of the American Revolution](#).

On September 6, 1774, at dawn and through the morning, militia companies from 37 rural townships across Worcester County marched into the shiretown (county seat) of Worcester. By an actual headcount taken by Breck Parkman,

one of the participants, there were 4,622 militiamen, about half the adult male population of the sprawling rural county. This was not some ill-defined mob but the military embodiment of the people, and they had a purpose: to close the courts, the outposts of British authority in this far reach of the Empire.

Lining both sides of Main Street for a quarter mile, the insurgents forced two dozen court officials to walk the gauntlet, hats in hand, reciting their recantations more than thirty times each so everyone could hear. The wording was strong: the officials would cede to the will of the people and promise never to execute "the unconstitutional act of the British parliament" (the Massachusetts Government Act) that would "reduce the inhabitants ... to mere arbitrary power." With this humiliating submission, all British authority vanished from Worcester County, never to return.

So too in every shiretown save Boston: some 1,500 patriots in Great Barrington, 3,000 in Springfield, and so on. In Plymouth, 4,000 militiamen were so pumped up after unseating British rule that they gathered around Plymouth Rock and tried to move it to the courthouse to display their power. The rock stood where it was, but British authority was gone from Plymouth and

every other town. The disgruntled Southampton Tory Jonathan Judd, Jr., summed it all up: “Government has now devolved upon the people, and they seem to be for using it.”

Raphael’s comment following Knox’ letter sums beautifully what POCLAD has been about for 25 years: it’s not enough to just react to corporate harm after corporate harm. We have to become self-governing. As Raphael put it: “They rose up as a body, not just to protest Crown and Parliament, but to displace their authority.”

Amen!

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