

Readings from Voices of a People's History of the United States



Contributed by Brent Simon

Thursday, 23 March 2006



History is a slippery subject, never quite as firmly fixed as our grade school teachers might have us believe. Its textbooks, on the other hand, are typically pedantic and staid, filled with broad, sweeping generalizations and all sorts of quantitative data that back up the who, where, when and how of its accounts, if often not quite fully illuminating the why. Emotional depth, causal relationship and contextual analysis aren't something you find in most classroom history books.

Author Howard Zinn made a dent in this travesty, this myopic methodology of instruction, with his excellent, rangy and still very digestible *A People's History of the United States*, originally published by HarperCollins in 1980. Pauline Maier, Merritt Roe Smith, Alexander Keyssar and Daniel Kevles would then go on to refine the concept with their superlative *Inventing America*. *Readings from Voices of a People's History of the United States*,

then, lends digital voice to the rich, stirring tradition of struggle and dissent in this country.

In October of 2004, a remarkable event was held at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, a talented group of actors and activists coming together to lend voice and breathe life into the dramatic narratives of Zinn's tome. The book is a remarkable collection of *prima facie* documents – from a speech by Native American Shawnee chief Temescal in the early 1800s to women's and civil-rights era orations to modern-day protests of soldiers and their families against the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Narrated by Zinn, editor Anthony Arnove and *Democracy Now!* radio host Amy Goodman, this two-hour presentation offers forth highlights as read by filmmaker John Sayles, actor-playwright Wallace Shawn, teacher Brian Jones, author-activist Paul Robeson, Jr. and actors Leslie Silva, Lili Taylor and Sarah Jones.

There's no denying this isn't a particularly sexy title (and a rather unremarkable cover certainly does it no favors), but the selected testimonies – ranging from fiery manifestos to impromptu speeches, stirring poems to pleading petitions – are an absorbing and persuasive lot. The readers, too, each bring a lot of focus and tastefully modulated energy to their recitations. Of special note is Robeson, Jr., reading from his famous father's suppressed testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and Sayles' presentation of an anti-imperialist treatise by none other than Mark Twain. The point? Honest dissent is not unpatriotic, no matter what those that attempt to club down open inquiry may say.

DVD extras on this single-disc full-screen release are unfortunately nil, save same-evening introductions by Gordon and Zinn, and a laughably billed "production notes" single static screen which houses the copyright information for Zinn's tome. That said, the video and audio presentation is clear and straightforward, keeping the focus where it should be – on the words herein. Would that all history digested in school were as interesting and alive as that on display in *Readings from Voices of a People's History of the United States*. **B+ (Movie) D (Disc)**

**For more in-depth coverage, click here to subscribe to
Now Playing magazine's print edition. Only \$9.99 for a year's subscription!**

[Close Window](#)