

# Hipster History

## Will Constitution Day be ruined by Matt Damon and Marxism?

By: Tony Woodlief

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Tomorrow, September 17, is Constitution Day. Aside from being a general observance where we honor new American citizens and the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, federal law mandates that “each educational institution that receives Federal funds for a fiscal year shall hold an educational program on the United States Constitution.” Constitution Day is a fitting time then to reflect on what schools are teaching about America’s founding principles.



And unfortunately, some people are pushing schools to teach Howard Zinn. In declaring the Marxist Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* one of its “All-TIME 100 best non-fiction books,” *Time* magazine [recently lamented that Zinn’s lengthy diatribe](#) is “a narrative you almost certainly didn’t read in school.” This is probably best, insofar as schools are still expected to teach history in their history classes. However, and if acolytes of the late Zinn have their way, many more students will come to understand the American Founding through his eyes.

For Zinn, the Founding was America’s first organized crime. Wealthy colonists, seeking to keep the poor from rebelling, contrived “the language of liberty” to entice middle class whites into overthrowing British rule -- thereby enriching the colonial elites and driving a wedge between the middle class and the poor. They used the Constitution, in turn, to enshrine slavery, keeping blacks and poor whites from joining forces. The American Revolution, in other words, is just another case of The Man keeping us down.

This is a tale that appeals to the underdeveloped intellects of teenagers and Matt Damon. Damon sparked a mini-revival of Zinn enthusiasm, when his eponymous hero in the film *Good Will Hunting* extolled Zinn's book. Damon also narrated the 2003 audio version of *A People's History*, which has seen 25 printings since 1980. It's indicative of Zinn's appeal to young people that Damon came under his influence as a child in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Another young person, indoctrinated in one of Zinn's Boston University courses, later went on, like Matt Damon, to prosper within the system of liberty Zinn considered a con job. This student subsequently bankrolled -- anonymously -- the Zinn Education Project, which in collaboration with other radical organizations has supplied thousands of teaching guides to elementary, high-school, and college teachers and librarians across the U.S.

Zinn's organization also markets scores of online resources to help teachers guide students through a mock trial of Christopher Columbus for his crimes against humanity, espy the hidden racism in the Pledge of Allegiance, and read a children's book about unionized farm animals (the irony of Marxists marketing an allegory about farm animals rebelling against farmers was perhaps missed).

Despite a history Ph.D., Zinn never grasped the difference -- essential to the Founders' vision -- between a democracy and a republic. "The basic principles of democracy are laid out in the Declaration of Independence," Zinn claimed in the student version of his book, *A Young People's History of the United States*. The Founders are therefore hypocrites, in Zinn's view, who never really supported the democracy they pretended to establish.

The truth, of course, which far too few students (and teachers, and politicians, and voters) grasp, is that the Founders considered democracy likely to produce tyranny every bit as dangerous as an unchecked dictator. This is why Madison argued, in the Federalist Papers, for checks and balances, and for limiting the power of factions to plunder their neighbors. Private property -- which the Founders believed was synonymous, unlike New Deal reformers, with liberty itself -- was essential to the American experiment in liberty.

Which is precisely why obesity is a greater threat to the American poor than hunger. American liberty has raised everyone's living standard, but inequality is inherent in creative destruction. Not even a Marxist utopia can instantly produce automobiles for everyone the moment automobiles are invented.

American prosperity is a perfect foil, then, for Zinn, because no matter what historical period he examined, some people had more wealth than others. Within the confines of Marxist orthodoxy, the only explanation for this is that wealthy elites are stealing from the rest of us.

Zinn's appeal is that he provided a narrative in place of dull U.S. history and civics textbooks. People crave stories, and Zinn gave them a compelling one: "We the People" want freedom and full bellies, but nefarious old white guys have thwarted us at every turn.

Marxists write dreadful fiction, however, and their non-fiction isn't much better, and whether you place Zinn on one end of that spectrum or the other, you're hard-pressed to find a mentally well-adjusted citizen

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who read all of *A People's History* without skipping pages. We get it, Howard, we get it. Rioters burn down some rich guy's house, the Capitalist Oppressors Cabal holds a confab, and soon there's another war.

The real history of the American Founding, however, is a gripping narrative, and Constitution Day is a great time to share it with students. Defying history, men staked their reputations, property, and lives on the conviction that liberty is worth dying for. They took on a world empire, and they won.

The Founders weren't one-dimensional capitalist oppressors, but they certainly weren't infallible either, as their tolerance of slavery attests. But this country eventually ended slavery, and extended liberty to all citizens, and it did so by *upholding* the principles in the Constitution -- contrary to Zinn's thesis.

Zinn portrayed the Founding as a freedom-destroying event, but in reality it sowed the seeds of liberty and prosperity for property owners and day laborers and women and slaves alike. This is not something students who fall prey to the Zinn Education Project will learn. Indeed, Zinn's Marxist worldview has already taken root; a Harris Interactive survey conducted for the Bill of Rights Institute found last year, for example, that one in five Americans believes Marx's famous dictum, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," is actually in the Bill of Rights.

People like a David versus Goliath story, and the American Founding is one, but Zinn has spun it backwards. The Founders struggled to protect us from the twin Goliaths of powerful government and mob rule. Zinn admired these evils, and resented the Founders for labeling them as such.

So who are the real Davids, if not demagogues and the nanny state? The Founding Americans who defeated a king, of course -- but also you, and me, and our children. Constitution Day is an excellent time to be reminded of that.

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