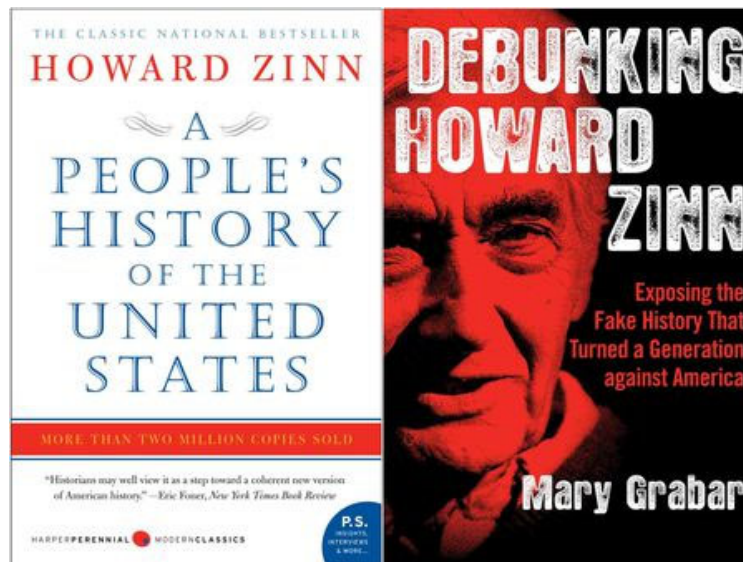


# The Oregonian

## Books

### ‘Debunking Howard Zinn’: Portland talk will feature critic of ‘A People’s History of the United States’

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A Portland talk will feature a critic of a long-popular history book. Courtesy of the publishers

By [Amy Wang](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Bruce Gilley, a Portland State University political science professor, couldn’t believe what he was seeing during an open house at his son’s Southeast Portland middle school: a copy of Howard Zinn’s best-selling American history book on a student’s desk.

“ ‘What the hell is this doing here?’ ” Gilley recalled thinking. “ ‘You’re giving them a communist propaganda sheet.’ ”

Zinn’s 1980 book, “A People’s History of the United States,” challenged the traditional approach to telling American history by offering a “bottom-up,” populist narrative that strove to “bring back into the forefront the people who created what was called the economic miracle of the United States,” Zinn told PBS host Bill Moyers in a 2009 interview, a month before the

author's death. "A People's History" was a runner-up for the National Book Award and has been assigned reading in numerous college courses and public schools. "A Young People's History of the United States," an edition aimed at middle schoolers, was adopted by the Portland School Board in 2008 for eighth-graders and is being used by some teachers, according to Portland Public Schools spokeswoman Karen Werstein.

"Zinn played a constructive role in the 1950s and early '60s in broadening the American history profession's scope of political and social history to include under-represented groups," said PSU history professor David A. Horowitz, author of "The People's Voice: A Populist Cultural History of Modern America," by email. But, Horowitz added, Zinn "never seemed to acknowledge that historians had largely put his insights to good use in later years."

More problematic, in Gilley's view, is that "A People's History" allowed readers "to just take leave of complex historical questions and offered them an easy narrative about an evil system," Gilley said. Additionally, "Zinn didn't pretend to be doing honest history," Gilley said. "He was explicit about that."

So when Gilley heard about the recently published "Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation Against America" (Regnery History, 352 pages, \$29.99), he invited author Mary Grabar to speak in Portland. Grabar is scheduled to appear at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 22, at PSU's Smith Memorial Union, 1826 S.W. Broadway, in an event hosted by the Oregon Association of Scholars, which Gilley leads.

Grabar, a resident fellow at The Alexander Hamilton Institute for the Study of Western Civilization, said her critique of Zinn was that "he misrepresents history."

"What I've tried to do is just look at what he says and provide a factual rebuttal," Grabar said. "I was quite surprised by the extent to which Howard Zinn distorted history, deliberately lied." For instance, she noted, Zinn wrote that internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II were kept secret. "Not until after the war did the story of the Japanese-Americans begin to be known to the general public," he wrote in Chapter 16. In fact, numerous newspapers and magazines wrote about the camps at the time, quite a few editorializing in favor of them.

"It's amazing what you'll find in that book when you start digging and it's really shocking that historians have not raised a ruckus and demanded the book be withdrawn," Grabar said. "He really has harmed traditional scholarship and the kinds of conversations that we should be having – having a balanced and honest look at our history, the good points and the bad points."

Grabar's talk will include what Gilley calls a "Save the Children from Howard Zinn" book drive: He's encouraging attendees to buy copies of Grabar's book to donate to local libraries and schools. "What if everyone had a 'Debunking Howard Zinn' alongside their 'People's History'? Well, that'd be a pretty great education," Gilley said.