

Oliver Stone & Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States*. New York: Gallery Books, 2012. ISBN 978-0-091-94931-0. 750 pages

On their song *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, the politically charged hip hop group Public Enemy introduces mainstream America to a sentiment long resonating in poor urban communities; i.e., the notion that American history might not be “real history” but “his story”. In other words, the *(his)story* championed by the establishment and taught in schools is often a very sanitized, ideologically-driven narrative, skewed by white privilege, bourgeois hegemony, and American exceptionalism. From this vantage point, America is always right, even when it is wrong; any other version of the story is demonized as fringe propaganda or *revisionist*.

Similar disparaging accusations will certainly be made of filmmaker Oliver Stone and historian Peter Kuznick's *The Untold History of the United States*. Stone and Kuznick offer a lucid historical narrative that is, at times, very critical of US foreign policy. Beginning with World War I and spanning right through the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, *Untold History* paints a picture of an America whose mission to spread freedom and democracy is often compromised by imperialist ambitions and narrow self-interest. When you consider the fact that the US currently has over 1,000 military bases on foreign soil, such a perspective does not seem entirely revisionist. In fact, it is a common narrative among a growing number of university based historians, as well as many disenfranchised peoples around the globe.

As the chapters of *Untold History* unfold, the plot line becomes so repetitious that it almost feels like we have been stuck in a time loop for the last century. Although the names, faces, and some other minor nuances have changed, the story remains essentially the same: Woodrow Wilson promised to spread democracy and end colonialism, but his policies undermined the first while advancing the second. FDR, despite being labeled a communist by his detractors, was a hero for reclaiming America's democratic and egalitarian heritages, but his conservative running mate would ultimately be the nation's undoing. After Truman's ascension to the presidency, the US would go on to squander much of the opportunity and goodwill created by FDR's policies, culminating with the needless bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The centerpiece of *Untold History*, which will undoubtedly ruffle the feathers of many conservative Americans, is its chapters on World War II. Growing up in the US and being familiar with its public school system, I can attest to the messiah complex that is ingrained in many Americans regarding their nation's role as the “savior of democracy” during the war. Stone and Kuznick offer a much less embellished version of the story: For one, the Soviet Union was equally (if not more) responsible for the downfall of the Axis Powers as the US was. In addition, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were morally and militarily unjustified demonstrations of power, aimed at scaring Stalin and the Soviets into postwar submission rather than ending the war. This, along with the Truman Doctrine, the

Berlin Airlift, and the Marshall Plan, pushed Stalin into the cold war, which would eventually escalate into the nuclear arms race.

A very similar pattern will repeat itself throughout the century, as the imperialist US, hiding behind the facade of democracy, seeks conflict and creates enemies around the globe—from Latin America, South East Asia, and more recently, the Middle East. Keeping this historical precedent in mind, the recent blunders of George W. Bush, and the imperialist ambitions of Barack Obama should come as no surprise. Once again, the cast of characters have changed, but the story, for the most part, remains the same.

The one major flaw of this study is that it perpetuates the idea that a few “great men” are the deciding factors of history. Stone and Kuznick look back on the past with regret: “If only” JFK had not been assassinated; “If only” Henry Wallace had been FDR's running mate when he died. In this regard, *The Untold History of the United States* misses the mark. By focusing on the actions of small cast of heroes and villains, Stone and Kuznick obscure the underlying driving force behind American imperialism and militarism—i.e. capitalism its ideologies.

Despite its shortcomings, I would have to say that *Untold History* is still a triumphant accomplishment. Whether or not it is revisionist history or another version of *(his)story* is up for debate, but this heavily footnoted work (with nearly one hundred pages of notes at the end), provides readers with an ample amount of sources, as well as other avenues for further research. Although some critics might accuse Stone and Kuznick of just preaching to the choir, such a cynical perspective forgets the fact that this version of American history is still unknown to many below the ivory tower academia. Hopefully, due to a big name like Oliver Stone's being attached to this book (which is also a *Showtime* documentary), more working-class Americans—the ones who pay the ultimate price for their country's misguided wars—will be exposed to a version of history that is less embellished with bourgeois propaganda. In light of the current “war on terror”, a book like *The Untold History of the United States* could not be more timely or appropriate.

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