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What Kind of History Should We Teach?

BY [JEREMI SURI](#) IN [PROMOTE & PROTECT](#), [SPECIAL](#) ON JANUARY 9, 2013 AT 11:23 PM

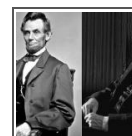


About two years ago I moved from Madison to Austin because I was convinced that the flagship university in Texas was building the best group of scholars and students in my field of study: international history, foreign policy, and leadership. The History Department at UT already had a distinguished group of faculty who study all parts of the globe and teach about what I call “the making of our modern world.” The History Department also housed the Normandy Scholars Program, devoted to the study of the Second World War, and an Institute for Historical Studies that brings the best scholars from around the world to campus to deepen our historical knowledge. Beyond the History Department, the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs had a Global Policy Studies Program committed to training the next generation of ambassadors, national security advisors, and intelligence analysts. The Strauss Center for International Security and Law on campus sponsored research projects, including undergraduates and graduate students, that explored the making of foreign policy in the past and its lessons for the present.

This is a long list. No other campus could compare. That is why I prevailed on my Midwestern wife and my Madison-born children to move from a university that we loved in Wisconsin to the one we believed was doing the very best work in the field of study I care so passionately about. We made the correct decision because UT’s strengths in international history and foreign policy that I listed above are even greater than I realized before I arrived here. In addition, the leadership of UT and its generous alumni have continued to enhance our preeminence in this field of study. Just this week, President William Powers [announced the creation of](#)

What we are teaching at UT, in almost all of our history and related courses, is a plural history of how many different people and parts of America relate to one another.

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[the William P. Clements Center on History, Strategy, and Statecraft](#) at UT. We now have more distinguished historians teaching topics like the Cold War, the Civil War, American Foreign Policy, Strategy and Decision-Making, and the Nature of the International System than on any other non-military campus that I know in the country. I am very proud of that. From what I can tell, our alumni are very proud of that too.

These facts make the ideological claims of the National Association of Scholars about The University of Texas at Austin misleading, and frankly dumb. The report they will release this Thursday is entitled: "Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?" At The University of Texas at Austin the answer is a resounding NO. Nothing in the report should convince you otherwise.

What the National Association of Scholars documents is that many of our courses taught by historians, including me, devote extensive time to lectures and readings about slavery, American Indians, labor unions, women's suffrage, prohibition, civil rights, immigration, poverty, and the rise of suburbs. Some of our courses even discuss Rock n'Roll music, consumer culture, and the Internet. How scandalous! For some reason, the authors of the report seem to think these topics are "un-American." It is almost as if a lesson that does not focus on a president or a war is a waste of time to the writers of this report.

No one cares more about teaching politics, foreign policy, and military affairs more than me. It is what I study. It is what I talk about all the time (so my wife and kids complain!). To teach the history of these subjects requires attention to slavery, American Indians, labor unions, women's suffrage, and everything else I listed above. Politics do not occur in a vacuum. The outcomes of war are not decided only by a few smart men. Elections, like the one we just experienced, are driven by many factors that include race, class, and gender.

What kind of history should we teach? What kind of history do our students need? They are not well served by simple ideological pronouncements about America as the "greatest nation" or America as the "worst nation," depending on your point of view. Young people can get extreme assertions on their iPhones without a professor in the room.

What students need is exposure to the complex ways in which various issues relate to one another in the real world. They need to understand how slavery caused a civil war. They need to think about the relationship between big corporations and local workers. They need to examine how mothers and fathers have reacted when their sons and daughters traveled far from our shores to defend our country. These and so many other issues of democracy, economy, and war are connected with the issues of race, class, and gender.

The National Association of Scholars report seems to demand a simple and one-sided history of just a few people. What we are teaching at UT, in almost all of our history and related courses, is a plural history of how many different people and parts of America relate to one another. What we are teaching is the beauty, the color, the promise, and also the challenge of contemporary America. What we are doing above all is to prepare our students to run a business or raise a family or serve their country in a world where success requires making connections between different ideas, memories, experiences, and peoples.

Nothing could be more American. It was, after all, James Madison who defined the greatness of American democracy as its pluralism. We are teaching pluralism in the history of foreign policy and race, economy and class, and, yes, war and gender. I wish skeptics from the National Association of Scholars and other groups would come and visit some of our courses. They have an open invitation to any of my lectures or seminars.

They have never come. Their report did not include a single campus visit or interview. They did not do their homework. If they did, they would see why I moved to Austin from another great university. This is where serious history is studied and taught so well. If you haven't been back in a while, come and see for yourself.

Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished Professor for Global Leadership, History, and Public Policy at UT-Austin.

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David

REPLY

JANUARY 11, 2013 AT 5:47 PM

A very well written response to a very silly and anti-intellectual critique of modern historiography.



A.B. Yorick

REPLY

JANUARY 11, 2013 AT 11:13 PM

Excellent points. And I'm glad to know the Madison-Austin pipeline is still working after all these years.

One wonders how many actual "scholars" are in the National Association of Scholars. Research methodology does not seem to be one of their strong points.



Ash Hall

REPLY

JANUARY 12, 2013 AT 10:37 AM

And now I want to take all of your classes. Seriously well-written response. I've loved all the history classes I've taken here, they're well-rounded and connective in a way that allows students to see the trends in history.



Richard Fonte

REPLY

JANUARY 13, 2013 AT 6:43 PM

The Answer to your question-What kind of History should we teach, according to the NAS study is comprehensive and inclusive. The NAS believes that all American History courses should involve significant reading assignments covering the topics of slavery, American Indians, Labor Union, women's suffrage, prohibition, civil rights, immigration, 19th century & 20th century, poverty, and yes, even popular culture. No, we do not think these topics are "un-American". No we do not demand a simple and one-sided history of just a few people—an elite view of history. But, we believe that Political History, intellectual history, military history, religious history and diplomatic history must also be reflected in the student reading assignments. Frankly, we found that this approach to history is more characteristic of Texas A&M for these required undergraduate courses than at UT. Why?

Our review of every reading assignment at the University of Texas found that all too often this comprehensive coverage of all themes in American History was not in evidence through the reading assignments despite the fact that the study double and triple classified articles into as many categories as possible. Yes, we recognize that political history does not occur in a vacuum. A more appropriate mix of themes is clearly evidenced at A&M. Somehow they have found a way to do this. Why not UT.

Now, we did find exceptions, for example, when a faculty member used an extensive reader that provided access to many primary documents that involved multiple historical themes or in the case of H.W. Brands whose comprehensive personal textbook covered a broad set of topics and readings. Students taking that course clearly had a rich and rewarding experience.

What the NAS believes was the intention of the 1971 law was that students would be provided a comprehensive survey of American History to fulfill their two course requirement in American

History. Frankly, we do not find that the “special topics” courses at the University of Texas meet the comprehensive standard. While many of these topics are interesting in themselves, they are intentionally not comprehensive.

Rather than reject the NAS study out of hand, I would suggest the department follow one of the recommendations of the report and develop a concept of a “core competency” of knowledge that would be expected by students in these required courses—one that is both comprehensive and inclusive.

Richard Fonte



Jeremi Suri

JANUARY 14, 2013 AT 1:00 AM

REPLY

We do take the report seriously at UT and we definitely believe in “core competencies.” Here they are: critical thinking, attention to evidence, grappling with different viewpoints, and clear exposition. We have applied these very core competencies to your report, and it fails. So do your comments.

Critical thinking: your report assumes there is only one way to think about history and only one way to define appropriate readings (your models in the report are from the 1940s!) There is no critical analysis of your own assumptions about history teaching or your “race, class, gender” mantra in your report.

Attention to evidence: your uses of evidence is borderline fraudulent. You mis-categorize major books which you obviously have not read carefully. You totally ignore what actually goes on in the classroom — you did not bother to investigate that. You rely on assessments of readings and syllabi from a single reader (who is unmentioned in the report, but whom you identified reluctantly at the press conference on Thursday.) Your main reader who categorized the books is not a historian by training and has no experience teaching history. A student paper with evidence like that would fail any serious college course!

Grappling with different viewpoints: You did not address alternative approaches to teaching history and at least investigate why serious historians might sometimes disagree with you. You have one view and no willingness in the report to give any credence to alternatives, even though they are embraced by every major historical organization. I guess everyone is wrong except for the enlightened few non-historians who agreed with you before your “study” was even conducted. This kind of narrow-mindedness would also earn an “F” in any college course.

Clarity of exposition: your report is written clearly and didactically, but you leave so much unclear: Who did all the research for your report? What qualifications did he have? What were the purposes of this report? Why did the research design involve simple web searches for titles and no investigation of actual teaching and actual student learning? Who paid for this? Why? What were the purposes? Did the report simply re-affirm what you already wanted to say? Did you test alternative hypotheses, as any good researcher would?

On Texas A&M — you have changed positions, sir, from your report. The report criticizes UT and Texas A&M for essentially the same “problems.” Now you seem to want to back away from criticizing Texas A&M. Why this change of position? Is this because of research or feedback from somewhere else? What is driving this report? Why should we believe a word you say?

We take our teaching very seriously at UT and we have very high standards and a very strong sense of core competencies. I am also a patriot, a child of immigrants, who deeply believes that all of our young citizens need a broad and deep understanding of American history. We strive to do better every day and we are open to constructive engagement and suggestions. What you are doing is dropping bombs and throwing around destructive accusations. American history is filled with reckless and self-serving critics, most of whom ended as discredited malcontents.



Richard Fonte
JANUARY 14, 2013 AT 8:53 AM

REPLY

You ask what were the purposes of the study. They are stated in the opening sentences of the report—Examine how the 1971 legislative requirement is being fulfilled. Our methodology was to use the tools now provided to any student or member of the public under the “three click rule” to access the syllabi and academic Vitae of sections and the faculty member teaching that course. Yes, we focused on the reading assignments listed on those Syllabi and classified the content of the reading assignment into 11 categories or themes of history. The overwhelming majority of reading assignments were classified into more than one category. To complete this classification, in reality, what was needed was good reading comprehension and an ability to discern what themes of history are evident in the reading assignment.

We had no prior knowledge as to the content of these readings and frankly we were somewhat surprised by what we found. We were surprised that the reading assignment coverage was so different at the University of Texas versus Texas A&M. While not ideal, A&M does have broader coverage in its reading assignments. We were also pleasantly surprised that those faculty even with strong Race, Class and Gender research interests who used broad readers or reader style textbooks had much broader coverage of historical themes than other faculty. Also, we thought intriguing those faculty that used dual and conflicting textbooks, such as Zinn and Paul Johnson. The biggest disappointment is the partial abandonment of survey courses by the University of Texas to fulfill the 1971 law. We were not aware of this prior to the study and would urge the department to reconsider whether these courses should fulfill the 1971 requirement. We have no objections to the courses themselves, but they are intentionally not comprehensive as intended by the 1971 law.

Richard Fonte

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