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## Defending Democracy by Teaching History

By [Jeremi Suri](#) - January 18, 2013

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The most important lesson any student can learn is to read critically. Citizens are bombarded every day with opinions disguised as facts masquerading as neutral information. If you are going to succeed at building a business or raising a family in today's world, you must be able to assess what you read for validity, accuracy, and usefulness. Without this critical skill, a citizen will sink under the weight of biases and misrepresentations.

One of the ironies of our times is that many of the conservative pundits who lament the decline of critical reading in the academy put their own biases on display in their polemics demanding a return to our supposedly lost intellectual traditions.

Groups such as the National Association of Scholars and the Texas Public Policy Foundation claim to analyze critically what their perceived opponents are up to, but they do not apply the same lens to their own work. Supporters of these groups amplify this fallacy by circulating various "studies" because they agree with the conclusions, not because they have tested the evidence. The conservative think tank echo chamber becomes a vicious circle of misrepresentations circulated without any attention to contrary evidence. These studies get attention for their ubiquity, if nothing else, even though they would not pass muster in any setting that required critical analysis.

The latest example of this deceptive phenomenon is a report published by the National Association of Scholars: "Recasting History: Are Race, Class, and Gender Dominating American History?"

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Anyone reading the title can anticipate the answer. The report asserts that historians at the University of Texas at Austin (my employer) and Texas A&M University are failing to teach the real stuff of politics, diplomacy, and military affairs. Instead, the report finds too much about African-Americans, poor people, and women. Presidents, military leaders, and business tycoons merit more attention, the report implies. The great men of history are allegedly getting lost in the shuffle of political correctness.

The National Association of Scholars commissioned the report precisely because it wanted to make this point. The Texas Public Policy Foundation helped unveil the report because it wanted to push new legislation. Despite the claim that this is a scientific study, it is really a brief written to support a pre-existing position.

The author, Richard Fonte, did not subject his study to peer review, he did not allow anyone with a different perspective to assess his data, and he did not consider alternative interpretations. He said what he knew he would say when he started the project. This report is biased opinion disguised as fact.

The author never visited a single history class covered in the report. He never talked with a single student or professor. Apparently, he simply collected course syllabi from the Internet, and categorized assigned readings by topic. How did he decide which books belonged in which categories? That was his judgment. How do we know he was correct in how he judged readings? We have to trust him.

We should not trust him. Let's take a few examples. In this report, assigning Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," is an example of "race, class, gender" teaching. E.L. Doctorow's prize-winning novel about the 1920s, "Ragtime," is similarly categorized. So is John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath."

If you dig only a little bit, you realize how flawed this report really is. All of these books, and so many others, are about basic issues of politics, war, democracy, and American nationhood. Some of them moved political actors, including Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, to reexamine their policies. Each of these works provides an opening into key documents about American history that were taught in many of the classes: Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms," and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter From a Birmingham Jail.

No one cares more about teaching politics, foreign policy, and military affairs than me. It is what I do. Yet to teach the history of these subjects properly requires attention to slavery, American Indians, labor unions, and women's suffrage as well as presidents, generals, and business tycoons. Politics do not occur in a vacuum. The outcomes of war are not decided by a few smart men. Elections, including 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 politics. Young people can get extreme assertions that mimic this report 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 standard would demand a simple and one-sided history of just a few people. What we are teaching as historians, in almost all of our 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. In defending the breadth of American history, we are defending the breadth of American democracy.

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