

# NOT EVEN PAST



## Responses from Authors of the NAS Report on Teaching US History at UT



Below you will find two responses we received to my blog about the report of the National Association of Scholars on the teaching of US History at UT and TAMU. (I am posting them in this form because we are in the process of installing a spam filter and have had to shut down our Comments function.)

From Peter Wood:

*There are so many mischaracterizations in this post it is hard to know where to begin. Maybe here:*

*"As a university professor, I consider it a primary part of my job to teach students to read carefully, to learn to understand multiple sides of any historical issue, and to draw conclusions based on the documents they read, rather than on the assumptions they bring to class. The NAS report fails to do all of those things. If a student turned in this study to a college level course, I suspect they would be asked, at the very least, to rethink the questions they are asking and to do more research."*

*The study in question took about two years. It examined every single one of the 85 courses that these two universities put forward as meeting the state requirement. We took the syllabi from these 85 courses and acquired all 625 of the assigned readings—625 of them. We read and classified those 625 readings, using in the first cut an independent researcher otherwise detached from the study. Then several other researchers independently reviewed his classifications. We prized rigor at every stage of review and analysis.*

*For Professor Neuberger to claim (on what basis?) that the NAS report wouldn't pass the elementary tests of evidence that he expects his students to meet in college level work suggests several possibilities: (1) she never read our report and is talking out of her hat; (2) she is not truthful about the standards to which she holds her own students.*

*As for drawing conclusions based on the documents rather than*

*"assumptions," I would make two points. First, we began the study with no particular interest in race, class, and gender as foci of courses in American history. We didn't know what we would find. Race, class, and gender emerged conspicuously from the first cut of the data and we subsequently framed some of our questions around these themes. The report wasn't shaped by assumptions but by the observed realities. Second, we would wish Professor Neuberger would follow her own stricture. She has made an audacious and wholly inaccurate assumption about our report—that it was founded on ideological animus—and built the entirety of her commentary on that phantasm.*

*A great many college history professors who teach in the race, class, gender area regard their focus as important and legitimate and are in no hurry to deny that that is indeed their focus. Is it such a surprise that a systematic examination of lower-level American history courses at two major universities demonstrates that among the consequences of this emphasis is diminished attention to other topics of study? We haven't called for leaving these perspectives out of teaching American history, but only for ensuring that the rest of history also receives due attention.*

*Professor Neuberger links us to a supposed opinion that historians should "offer a less critical view of US history" and focus instead on "positive elements of the past."*

*To the contrary, we have not called for teaching "positive elements of the past," but for teaching history in its fullness, with neither antagonism nor cheerleading.*

*Numerous historians these days, taking their cues from post-Enlightenment epistemologies, deny the possibility of a de-politicized study of history, which leaves them, like Professor Neuberger, ill-equipped to respond to a report that calls for teaching history from a perspective detached from any form of advocacy. Professor Neuberger confidently declares, "There is no history that is politically neutral." How would she know? Has she ever tried it? The best they can do is imagine that we don't really mean it—that we have a hidden agenda in favor of advocating something they don't like. But we do mean it. We aren't looking to replace one form of partisanship with another but with a sturdy effort to avoid partisanship.*



*Imagine that.*

From Richard Fonte:

*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. 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. Thus we do believe our report recommendation is asking for something that is not being done better elsewhere.*

*What the NAS believes was that 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.*

*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.*

*You reference your own interest in teaching approaches and suggest that it would desirable to focus on that issue rather than the political versus social history debate. On that point, 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. Both these approaches were used at UT and I think merit discussion*



*within the department. Those that used anthologies, in particular allowed student access to a broader assortment of historical themes and topics. We also recognize that some faculty members do this through their blackboard sites. Why not initiate a departmental discussion on such approaches to increasing course coverage of historical themes. What would be wrong with that?*

*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. On this point, we suggest that the University of Texas is clearly out of the mainstream on how the law is being implemented across the state.*

Let me [JN] briefly respond to these comments.

Clearly, Mr Wood and I have different ideas about what constitutes careful research. Whether you spend two years or two minutes doing it, "classifying" syllabi and readings still leaves the researcher with conclusions that don't accurately reflect actual classroom practice. I have no doubt that the classification was done with rigor, but such tagging alone produced inaccurate results. It is necessary, as every other commentator has pointed out, to set foot in the classroom to see that teaching on race, class, and gender is often contextualized in the broader, fuller context the authors of the report would like.

It is also necessary to think about our courses at The University of Texas at Austin in the context of the courses our students have already taken in high school. As the flagship institution in the UT system, I believe that we can expect more from our students who have had to work harder and further develop their skills and talents in order to get into the flagship university. We can assume that UT-Austin students have learned something about the broad outlines of US History in their middle and high school classes and do not need to repeat those courses here. This allows us to teach more complex courses that focus on specific issues, and that deepen knowledge of less well known subjects. Some students can skip the comprehensive surveys they have already mastered in order to specialize, to study specific topics in more depth. So while I agree with everyone else who has pointed out that our courses are more comprehensive than syllabi seem to show, it is not necessary for all classes to offer the kind of comprehensive curriculum that Mr. Wood and Mr. Fonte would prefer.

As for *a priori* assumptions guiding research and the possibilities of politically neutral history, I would point out that I did not invent the report's assumptions, I quoted them from the text itself. Mr. Wood's belief that politically neutral history exists is another assumption that seems to guide his thinking and perhaps guided the production of the report as well. Mr. Wood asks me to try to produce neutral history, but, curiously, offers none of his own.

He's right that I can't imagine an analytical or even descriptive history that doesn't contain bias of some kind. But biased history still isn't the same thing as partisanship. It is our job is to identify and understand the biases of our sources, to acknowledge our own biases, and to teach students to do the same. Give us examples of politically neutral history if you think it exists. I'd love to read something they consider neutral. Although Mr. Wood doesn't mention it in his response to me, at the press conference announcing the report, he called for his "friends in the Texas Legislature" to intervene in the way US History is taught here. Nothing political or partisan in that, is there?

Joan Neuberger  
Editor, Not Even Past



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