

## The Purpose of American Government Textbooks: A Response to Oliver and Nathan

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## The Purpose of American Government Textbooks

A Response to Oliver and Nathan

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**A**s measured by the number of students reached, American government textbooks are the most important works produced by our professions. Yet they have been afforded relatively little critical attention. The effort made by Oliver and Nathan should be appreciated both as a very good one and an all-too-rare one. What I found especially interesting was their willingness to entertain the notion that government textbooks can be vital, critical, relevant, explorative of controversial questions, and even iconoclastic. However, they fail to make explicit their own understanding of what the function and objective of an introductory textbook (and introductory course) should be. At one point they write:

Is the instructor . . . merely to communicate information? Is the instructor to engage in "political socialization" and strive for the inculcation of a somewhat critical but, ultimately, supportive set of

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attitudes toward the American system while at the same time conveying the spirit of contemporary political science? . . . should the instructor engage in a kind of conceptual wrecking operation which, as a by-product, leaves the student perplexed concerning his position in the political system and confused as to what is to be done next? [p. 447]

Oliver and Nathan leave these questions unanswered. But their subsequent critique of my book, *Democracy for the Few* and the work of several others suggests that they expect a textbook to act as a catalyst for change, that is, change in a progressive and perhaps even revolutionary direction, with strategies and tactics that are appealing and workable for students. However, the function of *Democracy for the Few* was to make an analysis of the American political system—not to present the path to an alternative one. If one spends much time and effort locating the virus, should one then be faulted for not having yet developed the vaccine?

What is lacking in my book and in the texts by Dye and Zeigler, and Katznelson and Kesselman—according to Oliver and Nathan—is “a careful consideration of how things might be otherwise” (p. 459). First, I’m not sure that Dye and Zeigler really want things to be otherwise to any great extent. Second, speaking for myself, a careful consideration of how things might be otherwise is a momentous task requiring a book of its own. I plead guilty to the charge that my diagnosis of the American political economy lacks a tactical prescription. My prescription, of course, is socialism but I don’t tell how we are to achieve it or if indeed we can. The reason is that I don’t *know* how and I don’t know *if* we ever will achieve socialism at this stage of historical development.

Anyone who has not only thought about change but has been active in political struggles knows that there are no certain scenarios, that change is a matter of power and that it is one thing for generals without troops to map campaigns, but

another to actually effect change. Change in consciousness is both cause and effect of action and struggle. Change arises from the actions of people guided by a correct understanding of (a) the political forces and interests they confront, (b) the political tasks before them, (c) the ultimate goals that must be realized in order not to end up with more of the same. *Democracy for the Few* was about (a), and only touched lightly on (b) and (c), because it is only an American government textbook.

The political tasks change as the struggle develops. The emergence of certain forces for change begin to have an effect on the very reality that is being assessed, offering new possibilities and new dangers. This is why most practitioners of change stress the ideographic and contextual quality of tactics. And this is why, unless they are writing from hindsight about past victories, they seldom can offer complete scenarios, and have relatively little to offer in the way of precise strategies and tactics, except to urge flexibility of means and inflexibility of ultimate objectives. Thus “What is to be done?” books have an unsatisfying quality about them—talking about “whats,” but often not giving us the “hows.” They fail to deal with the intractable congestion of political reality and the problems of what to do in the face of vastly superior power. Social problems cannot be solved in the manner of mathematical problems—not even in a textbook.

Oliver and Nathan make the inaccurate statement that one must look to the pluralist textbooks for any discussion of the changes going on in American political consciousness. In fact, I offer a lengthier and more detailed discussion of such changes than the two textbooks they cite. They indicate that the conventional texts suggest that the political system is “much more in flux” than do the critical texts. As evidence of this flux they refer to the discussion in Burns et al. regarding “changes underway” in Congress. But the question is not which textbook appears more “sensitive” and more alert to “opportunities” for change, but which is more accurate. Oliver and Nathan might

have paused to test the pluralists' sensitivity to change against the actual record of the Ninety-Fourth Congress. (I do so in the forthcoming second edition of *Democracy for the Few*, and the findings are not encouraging.) The thrust of my critique about the political system, including Congress, is that procedural and party changes do not and *cannot*—because of operational imperatives and necessities of the politico-economy—solve the problems of the nation. Rather than labeling this proposition as pessimistic or discouraging, it should be subjected to the test of evidence and argument.

More than a dozen years ago, Theodore Lowi wrote a lively insightful critique of existing American government textbooks. Among other things, he said most texts lack an analytic perspective and tend to be inventorial, overly comprehensive, and therefore dull. The superior book would be one that “is hardly half the size of the typical leading texts, yet certainly more than half the usual nuts and bolts are contained somewhere within its pages. . . . In place of coverage, it offers analysis, good middle level theory and, therefore, incitement to controversy and inquiry” (Lowi, 1964: 599). Whether Lowi would agree or not, I believe this is an apt description of the kind of book I tried to write: one that is packed with information about the substance, performance, output, and structure of the political system, but information which, rather than cataloguing the obvious, draws the reader to an inquiry, an analysis, and an overall synthesis of American political reality.

Oliver and Nathan's concern is that the brutal abuses of the system are presented with such force “that political action and participation by the individual seems utterly futile” (p. 459). I would offer only two observations: first, I have discovered that many persons who feel political effort is futile would not be all that ready to exert themselves even if there were readily accessible means for change. Their eagerness to conclude that “nothing can be done” fits with their desire to do nothing. Second, some feedback has been received indicating that many

readers of my book feel “strengthened” for having read a “deeper critique” of the “system”; some feel that their understanding of what is wrong is better integrated; some feel liberated from previous myths; some are less tolerant of the status quo now that they are better informed about it. And that was my goal: to leave the student better informed. In any case, not all students are reduced to a stupified apathy.

Finally let me say that the function of an American government textbook should not be to attack or support the student’s ingrained beliefs, nor to attack or support the status quo, nor to offer a way out of it. The function should be to offer a description and analysis of power and interest in the American political system as accurately and unflinchingly as one can. This means avoiding the distortions that come when one tries to engineer an appearance of “objectivity” by using “balanced” statements like: “Businessmen have their organized groups and workers and consumers have theirs, and all compete for favor and influence.”

*Whether the analysis one arrives at leaves students discouraged or encouraged, activated or apathetic is irrelevant.* The question is: is the analysis true. Is it well argued? Is it supported by evidence that seems acceptable? Does it have an explanatory power that is superior to other arguments? Does it draw connections and show linkages between previously scattered and haphazardly presented phenomena? Does it enable us to look at various political events and see the forces that are operative? Does it leave us repeatedly puzzled and surprised about things like Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, Chile, CIA lawlessness, military spending, economic recession, inflation, the failure of domestic spending policies, the iniquity and ubiquity of U.S. overseas interventionism, or does it help us explain and anticipate these things?

The function of an American government textbook should be pretty much the function of any good book in political science.

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