

# One Nation-One Semester



## High-altitude flights across American History

It was early December, the end of the fall semester, and I was sitting in my office, having just taught my last class. The usual mixed feelings of exhaustion and elation had given way to equally predictable and tangled emotions: relief and regret. Though the class had gone well, there were the inevitable pangs of disappointment over missed teaching opportunities and the regular resolves about how to make it all work a little better. Surely I could shake up more members of the cell-phone generation—reaching them sooner and challenging them more deeply—the next time around.

But there would be no next time. This wasn't just the last class of the 2006 fall term; it was the last course in my short and enjoyable thirty-two-year teaching career at Duke. With a knock on the door, a history department secretary asked in an off-hand way if I could “help move some furniture in the graduate lounge?” Even as we chatted going down the hall, I had no inkling that I was innocently being ushered into a retirement celebration cooked up by busy graduate students—the same kind of unpretentious and energetic young historians that I had been working with for more than three decades.



Peter Wood (at left), working at his dining room table with fellow textbook authors Elaine May, Jackie Jones, Vicki Ruiz, and Tim Borstelmann. Photo by Elizabeth Fenn.

After I mastered my total surprise, we toasted each other in champagne and cider and devoured a homemade cake. They even gave me a little clock, marked, “With Best Wishes and Thanks”—which sits on our mantel piece, the perfect gift for an early American historian. Before they dispersed to grade term papers, we chatted about the U.S. history text, *Created Equal*, which I was revising for its third edition, and the unusual class I had just finished, entitled One

Nation-One Semester.

Since then, I have had a full year to think about both those topics and the surprising, satisfying way that they came together. I can now see more clearly, in retrospect, that working hard on a U.S. survey with four impressive American historians boosted me out of my engaging, comfortable "colonial" world. It gave me the renewed excitement about big-picture historical themes I needed to attempt such an unorthodox final fling.

What did I learn from teaming with other scholars to tackle an undergraduate text, writing the eight colonial and revolutionary-era chapters of a one-thousand-page U.S. survey for Pearson Longman? To state the obvious first: lots of teamwork is involved in such an extensive collaboration. Fortunately, after nearly a decade of drafting and revising, sharpening and expanding, the friendships among our far-flung team are stronger than ever. We set out with a desire to weave together the political history we had learned as students with the social history we were practicing in our research. We wanted to tell a story that was more inclusive than the one we had inherited, not just in terms of race, class, and gender, but in terms of geography as well. Along the way, we learned a lot about the mysteries of textbook publication and the complexities of outsourcing. (One draft map came back to us with the Atlantic labeled as the Pacific!) I also gained some basic insights into student demography, our professional blinders, and my own shifting sense of the relation of the forest and the trees.

As a writer, I learned something that should have been obvious to me. If most of tomorrow's students of American history will inhabit the Web, many of today's most committed students attend community colleges. When I first arrived in North Carolina to teach on Duke's gothic campus back in 1975, the struggling tobacco town of Durham also contained a small vocational institution devoted to industrial education. I paid no attention a decade later when that school added a university-transfer program to its curriculum and changed its name to Durham Technical Community College. A similar school in neighboring Alamance County became Alamance Community College in 1988.

The huge expansion of community colleges that took place around me in North Carolina was also going on all across the country. But somehow, with my nose buried in research notes and recommendation letters, I had missed most of it. Working on *Created Equal* has finally given me a chance to gain a better sense of this explosion and to meet some of the impressive teachers and students at places like Collin County Community College in Texas. (Since *Created Equal* now exists in an Advanced Placement edition for high schools, I have also had a chance to talk shop with scores of dedicated history teachers at recent AP annual meetings, sponsored by the College Board.)

I am now intrigued, as a textbook coauthor, by how readily many of my peers still dismiss the enterprise of textbook writing. Granted, I once rowed in that same boat, and I would still agree that these tomes seem far too numerous, too

costly, and too bulky. Some of these "aircraft carriers," as students often call the largest behemoths, are also too bland, stilted, or old-fashioned. But one could argue that for writers and readers alike surveys represent a strong antidote to the overspecialization and narrowness that has bedeviled our field. (If only our profession's overabundance of monographs could be converted into ethanol!) Sadly, most historians have lost the art of talking in persuasive general terms to the broad public, while most citizens and public leaders have all but given up on seeking useful commentary and insights from academic historians.

Helping to design a survey text may be one way to make the best research in our profession available to a broader audience. But such overviews are harder to write (and certainly less lucrative per hour spent) than most colleagues suspect. So for me the main motivation became personal. Could I pull together the diverse threads of early American history into coherent and suggestive chapters? Could I run a swift and respectable first lap in the U.S. history relay race, getting *Created Equal* off to a suitable start before handing the baton off to my teammates (Jackie Jones, Elaine May, Tim Borstelmann, and Vicki Ruiz)? It was an exhausting leg but also a satisfying one.

In retrospect, I wish I had tackled such an assignment earlier in my career, since it forced me to read widely, weigh priorities, and hone my prose. It improved my teaching in ways I had not foreseen, since it obliged me to get above the trees and look at the general contours of the entire forest. Undoubtedly, this extended exercise in exploring wider vistas set the stage for one last, highly enjoyable pedagogical experiment: One Nation-One Semester.

Why would anyone ever tackle such a course, attempting to cover all of American history in a fifteen-week semester? I had learned from experience that the standard two-semester survey had several weaknesses. For one thing, the pace, though brisk, often seemed slow to impatient, instant-messaging sophomores. And even aspiring history majors sometimes bogged down in such historical twilight zones as the 1720s, the 1830s, or the 1950s. Also, for credit-counting undergraduates, the luxury of a two-semester overview cut into their busy course plan, so they often settled for only half of the year, skipping over how the saga begins or never discovering how it ends up. This was especially true for scientists and other non-history majors who were eager to build on their high school knowledge of the American past but who could not spare two terms to delve into the national attic.

In a department where many professors shun year-long survey courses and where drawing non-majors into history classrooms is always a plus, the experiment seemed plausible. So I jumped at the chance. It would put an exciting wrap on a teaching career that had included such prior adventures as Native American History, History and the Visual Image, and the History of Documentary Film.

Besides, I had once covered the same ground at a much faster speed. Years earlier, a dean at Duke's Fuqua Business School had called unexpectedly,

inviting me to meet with an international group of MBA students and “give them some background in American history.” When I asked how many days or weeks this survey would take, he suggested, “I think three hours would be enough. Feel free to take the *whole* morning, but leave time for breaks and discussion.”

“You bet,” I said, though he couldn’t see the expression on my face. I decided to emphasize four themes—pulled from dozens—that seem necessary to understanding America’s past. My short final list, as I recall, included our Christian, and predominantly Protestant, religious roots; our unusual ethnic and racial diversity; and our long track record as an entrepreneurial, capitalist nation; along with our distinctive geography and abundant natural resources. Armed only with several handouts, I tracked these variables across the 1700s, the 1800s, and the 1900s. We even had time for breaks between centuries and for discussion at the end!

What probably sounds like a useless cop-out or an exercise in lunacy turned out to be, from my perspective, a novel exchange, full of new insights, juxtapositions, and connections. The invitation to transit the vast territory of the American past at a velocity of Mach 2.0 had come about as a chance encounter, a “busman’s holiday” joyride. But this brief Top Gun exploit, talking about U.S. history while moving at twice the speed of sound, proved to be one of my most exhilarating and memorable teaching experiences.

By comparison, History 103, with its eye-catching title, *One Nation-One Semester*, would be a leisurely fly-over in a Lindbergh-era biplane. I would meet twice a week with thirty students, giving two midterms and a final exam. If all went according to plan, we would fight the U.S.-Mexican War and visit Seneca Falls before fall break in mid-October; we would be approaching Watergate when Thanksgiving arrived. Since I was most familiar with *Created Equal*, we would use that text to guide us, along with a connected book of primary source readings.

Naturally, we would keep an eye on main themes that had intrigued my team as we were writing *Created Equal*, such as the remarkable diversity of both the American land and the American people, the ebb and flow of power between the nation’s elites and its democratic masses, and the large and ever-shifting relationship between the United States and the wider world. But we would also track themes that seemed most important to class members or that emerged during the semester: the persistence of discrimination; the scope of American religious tolerance over time; the democratic, or tyrannical, strength of the public media. With the 2006 political campaigns in full swing during much of the fall term, party politics was in the air, though we worked hard to avoid predictable red-blue debates and to de-escalate the still-simmering “culture wars” wherever possible.

I assigned a money-saving, unbound version of *Created Equal*, punched for three-hole notebooks. This limited the resentments that arise from high prices and from having to lug a large book around campus all semester. Also, bringing two

new chapters to class each week, instead of thirty, underscored the sense that we were constantly progressing onto different terrain, not wandering in circles through the same hinterland. Each session we would tackle one chapter and some connected documents.

On the first day of class, I distributed a handout urging students, among other things, to read assignments carefully in advance . . . and to get enough rest. (Lack of sleep had reached epidemic proportions on campus in recent years, and I wanted everyone to bring their minds, not just their sleepy bodies, to our sessions!) I had learned over time that many Duke students prefer to play their cards close to the vest, so the sheet also urged everyone to speak up freely. "Engaged give and take, with respect for varied opinions—and the right of everyone to change their views, generally makes for the liveliest classes."

Before "closing the cabin door," I reiterated the non-stop nature of our mission, so that anyone looking for a more leisurely flight was free to exit. No one departed, so I divided the students into ten groups of three. After that, on their assigned weeks, all members of one group would take responsibility for doing the reading early and posting brief, suggestive responses (signed and proofread) on our electronic blackboard site. That way, the rest of us could read these "postings" before class, and they often helped to shape and advance our lecture and conversations.

For me, and for most who took part I gather, the experience was overwhelmingly positive. It would take another column to discuss all the individual breakthroughs that occurred along the way. But the general pattern was clear. Even more than in most American history classes, this wide overview (mixed with lively discussions in a class of limited size) allowed lots of students to get beyond the strange barrier that often separates personal and family history from broader events and patterns.

Many of us who have become historians did so because we intuited these connections; they intrigued us from the start, so they often seem self-evident. But it does not take much time in front of history classes to realize that most students, having conceded the most obvious ties (or claimed the most self-serving ones) often resist more subtle or unflattering linkages between our personal and our collective heritage, at least until given space to open up. This kind of rapid overview provided an excellent space for finding and exploring such meaningful links.

By term's end, two things struck me particularly, one that I anticipated and one that I did not. I knew at the outset that we would obviously be sacrificing "depth" all along the way, but I figured that much of the detail that students cram into their minds or their computers during a survey course is lost or forgotten within months anyway. So I was willing to trade *elaboration* for *connections*.

In short, I hoped that our accelerated speed would bring diverse periods,

people, and problems into useful proximity. It is harder to induce and capitalize on such juxtapositions in a course that moves at a statelier pace. From the start, I described our journey as a rapid airplane ride at a rather high altitude, where we were giving up the benefits of a hike in the woods for the advantages of seeing wide vistas and the ways that changing historical landscapes fit together in logical and surprising ways. To illustrate this, I regularly traced our "flight" with a simple chalk timeline across the long blackboard at the front of the room. The far left side became the most distant, pre-Columbian, North American past—our initial runway, so to speak. The right edge of the board became the present, and as the term progressed we were steadily approaching that familiar landing zone.

But as we were traveling forward in time, week-by-week from left to right, we could also think our way back through the twentieth century, moving from right to left. This provided the teaching tool that I had not expected. In our discussion on any given day, we could pause to explore different generations of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents in the most recent century and how they might have viewed the subject we were discussing. It became clear early in our flight that even while we were still talking about Puritan religion or Eli Whitney's cotton gin, we could also talk about historiography. We could, to put it another way, triangulate a given topic, looking back at it from several different chronological vantage points.

These interludes were often only brief asides, but they soon became a key part of the course. I would go to the right side of the board, standing "in the present," and we could look back together along the timeline toward the worlds of the students' recent ancestors. Then we could all comment on how those individuals, diverse as they were, might have understood the same topic that we were discussing. Perhaps they learned about it in an American school of the 1920s or the 1960s, or in some distant foreign country, for that matter.

Take Columbus, for example. Clearly his voyage looked quite different in 1792, when colleges, rivers, and cities were eagerly being named "Columbia," or in 1892, when the expanding United States was beginning to look overseas. A century later, viewed from the vantage point of 1992, Columbus's saga was seen from still another angle by many. Alfred Crosby's seminal book, *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), had had two decades to sink in, and the decimation of indigenous Americans from exposure to new foreign diseases had become a topic of active debate.

Similarly, a class discussing the Civil War and Reconstruction period in 1915, when D. W. Griffith's racist extravaganza, *The Birth of a Nation*, was being promoted in movie theaters and praised from the White House, would have different assessments of that past era than a cohort that had watched reruns of Edward Zwick's 1989 film *Glory* while still in high school. Likewise, history students during the 1950s, the heady postwar era of penicillin and the Salk polio vaccine, surely had more trouble comprehending the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918 than undergraduates in the 1990s, who were suddenly confronting the

horrendous AIDS epidemic on a global scale. As we zoomed over recent decades late in the semester, we had already glimpsed some of the different ways that earlier generations experienced their own present and understood the national past.

Needless to say, our ground speed sometimes seemed especially fast during our long decent across the twentieth century. ("Keep an eye out on Tuesday for the New Deal, coming up on the left side of the plane. We will be passing over World War II shortly.") But by the time we landed safely in early December, most of the passengers, and the pilot too, had a refreshed sense of the terrain of American history and also of the changing ways in which historians and other citizens have viewed this varied and continuous landscape.

As a historian, I have been lucky enough to go on lots of long archival hikes over the years, and I look forward to others. Still, I always wanted to fly extra fast across American history at least once before I retired. Now I can say that I did it. It proved a liberating trip, and I learned a great deal along the way. These days I am finding the steady pace of the little clock on the mantel to be plenty fast enough.

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