

# A USABLE PAST FOR THE PRIVILEGED: INDEPENDENT SCHOOL HISTORY IN THE 1980s\*

By GEORGE LAMPLUGH, THE WESTMINSTER SCHOOLS

Five years ago I spoke at the GAH Athens meeting on "Strengthening the Teaching of History in the Secondary Schools," and I urged strengthening electives and dismissed the "back to basics" movement as a fad. Since then most of our electives have disappeared at Westminster, an independent college preparatory school in Atlanta, and "back to basics" is orthodoxy.

Our present requirement can be satisfied through completion of year-long survey courses: Origins of Western Society (OWS), European History, and American History. A few electives exist such as Economics, Politics, Urban Problems, Psychology, and Philosophy, but they do not satisfy the departmental requirement of two or three years in history, depending upon whether a student takes two or three years of science.

Survey courses emphasize use of the basic historical skills of gathering and interpreting evidence, analyzing concepts, evaluating generalizations, and essay-writing.

Faculty who teach OWS and European history work together in planning tests and other major assignments. Both Advanced Placement (AP) and regular students are encouraged to take the AP exam. The three faculty who teach AP American history differ in their approach. I emphasize social history and give only two tests each term in addition to interpretive essays on major topics or supplementary paperbacks and documents-based questions. Courses and texts are continuously reevaluated.

Teaching at Westminster is an interesting undertaking as the quality of students and faculty, the support from parents, and the strong emphasis on Advanced Placement combine to create an atmosphere that is almost collegiate. The real challenge of prep school history teaching is developing a sophisticated course for students who are intellectually capable of mastering it but temperamentally unwilling or unable to do so without considerable effort on the part of the instructor.

There is little room for specialization in independent school teaching. Although research and publications are not incompatible with independent school teaching, absent are the recognition and encouragement on one hand, and the pressures to "publish or perish" on the other.

---

\*Eds. synopsis