

By Randy Cohen, The Ethicist

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The Issue

It's back to school for former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. [Texas Tech University](#) is [paying him \\$100,000](#) to teach a single undergraduate political-science course, Contemporary Issues in the Executive Branch, with an enrollment of 15, and to help recruit minority students. Supporters say he offers students a rare chance to learn from a participant in important national events. Opponents say he is overpaid and underqualified and left his last job in disgrace. Is the school providing honorable employment or a sinecure for a sinner?

The Argument

Texas Tech should not have hired Gonzales, as many of his new colleagues proclaim. Passionately. "I think it's preposterous for him to come here," an unnamed professor told The Daily Toreador, the student paper ([as reported by Main Justice](#) , an online magazine that follows the Justice Department). "They're trumping up some fake position to bring him in, and I don't know what his responsibility will be, but I'm certain it won't be commensurate with his pay. If you look at his teaching load, it's incredibly reduced."

That masked scholar has at least part of a point. Nationwide, the average pay for an adjunct professor is [about \\$1,800 per course](#) . Gonzales makes more than 55 times that. Sweet. But not necessarily wicked.

I, too, am susceptible to resentment of those I think egregiously overpaid. (Damn you, [Eddy Curry](#) !)
Surely their ludicrously inflated salaries could better be spent on ... oh, say, me. But a defense

can be mustered for a school's celebrity hire: even if it is dubious pedagogy, it can be cunning marketing — publicizing the university, attracting students, gratifying alumni and boosting their donations to their alma mater. (Professor Brangelina, have you met Professor Talking Gecko from the Geico Commercials?)

The anti-Gonzales camp makes a more cogent case against his appointment [in a petition](#) signed by more than 90 Texas Tech faculty members. One telling assertion: Hiring Gonzales was cronyism, undertaken at the behest of Tech's chancellor, Kent Hance, a "good friend" of Gonzales's. "Hiring faculty is paradigmatically the responsibility of academic departments," the petition argues. "It is not appropriate for the chancellor to be calling the deans of the various colleges asking them to hire particular individuals."

[Walter Schaller](#), an associate professor of philosophy at Texas Tech who teaches ethics, among other things, is the author of the petition. He told me: "Strictly speaking, no rules were broken. I don't have any sense that the dean was pressured into it. But there is a built-in conflict: if you say no to the chancellor, you don't know what goodies you're giving up. The chancellor should not be suggesting appointments for his friends."

No matter how Gonzales got the job, according to the petition, his "ethical failings" disqualify him for it. The sins cited include the firing of nine U.S. attorneys, making misleading statements to Congress, mishandling the "torture memo," denying the right of habeas corpus and repudiating the Geneva Conventions. It is a disheartening C.V., but some of these allegations are unproved, and others blur the distinction between moral transgression and policy dispute. Yet it does seem that Gonzales's past conduct puts him afoul of the university's own [Statement of Ethical Principles](#) and that Tech would probably reject other applicants subject to similar criticisms. As [an anonymous student posted](#) to The Daily Toreador's Web site: "Maybe Tech should also hire Madoff to teach Contemporary Issues in Running an Investment Fund."

More potent still is the petition's charge that Gonzales fails to meet the university's standards for faculty. It asks: "Does he have a noteworthy academic record? Does he have a record of publishing in law reviews?"

It is true that universities regularly waive such criteria to hire accomplished practitioners — a musician or an actor or a dancer to instruct students at a performing-arts school, for example.

But such jobs generally go to those who provide a sort of vocational training. This might apply here were Gonzales teaching law — many law schools distinguish between faculty proffering theory and those teaching practice — but it makes little sense for an undergraduate political-science seminar. And, as it happens, the chancellor “offered Gonzales to the law school,” Schaller said, “but there was little interest.”

Gonzales’s defenders argue that there is another, related reason to make an exception here: There is much to be learned from people at the center of great events. As one student put it in a post to the Treador, “Whether you agree or disagree with him politically, he was a ‘player’ at a level that allows him to offer unique insight.” Gonzales himself [told Texas Lawyer magazine](#) : “I dare say very few are going to have the same level of insight, the direct hands-on involvement that I can bring to the students.”

Schaller demurs. “I’m willing to grant that a former attorney general has enough life experience to teach one class,” he said. “But there is so much that Gonzales cannot say — because of pending investigations, because of what he’s said he’s saving for his book — as to be overwhelming. He can’t have the kind of honest exchanges students can expect from a professor.” Schaller points out that Gonzales acknowledged such restrictions in [his interview with Deborah Solomon](#) in The New York Times Magazine last month.

I’d go further. If participating in great events guaranteed insight into them, [Robert E. Lee’s horse](#) , Traveller, would be teaching military history at West Point. (If he weren’t dead. Or a horse.) To be a scholar requires training, acumen, genuine professional sophistication, not merely being there. We rightly distinguish between subject and object, between a historical figure and a historian. A better way of studying Gonzales’s “direct hands-on involvement” in Washington would be for him to deliver a series of public lectures that students could subsequently analyze under the tutelage of actual scholars, who would earn in a year what Gonzales would be paid for one hypothetical hour of nostalgic palaver. I’m a reformer not a radical. But as things stand, Tech is paying him a lot of money to do a job for which he is unsuited. It was improper for the school to offer and indecorous for Gonzales to accept.

(Disclosure: In [a letter to The Times Magazine](#) Gonzales called my advice in [The Ethicist of Dec. 3, 2006](#) , “reckless and naïve.” Subsequent events have made it hard to regard his disapproval without irony.)

Randy Cohen has written humor articles, essays and stories for numerous newspapers and magazines. His first television work was writing for "Late Night With David Letterman," for which he won three Emmy Awards. His fourth Emmy was for his work on "TV Nation." He received a fifth Emmy as a result of a clerical error, and he kept it. For two years, he wrote and edited News Quiz for Slate, the online magazine. Currently he writes the The Ethicist for The New York Times Magazine

. Each week, in Moral of the Story, he will examine a news story from an ethical perspective.