What Leads to the Fall of a Great Empire? Using Central Questions to Design Issues-based History Units

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History teaching continues to be driven by an overriding emphasis on information coverage. This trend has resulted in a fragmented approach to teaching that privileges the acquisition of facts over in-depth study (Evans 1989; Evans, Avery, and Pederson 1999; Goodlad 1984; Newmann 1988; Onosko 1992, 1996; Onosko and Swenson 1996; Wiggins 1989). Incoherent and fact-driven teaching is exacerbated by the writing and organization of history textbooks. Textbooks present information with little regard for history’s controversial issues or debatable questions and offer students scant opportunities to study worthwhile content in any real depth (Loewen 1996; Ravitch 2004; Shaver 1996).

Of course, these are not the only reasons why coverage continues to be so popular in history classrooms. Even very dynamic history teachers tend to teach in ways that are familiar and comfortable to them, whereas others often subscribe to the notion that students must acquire extensive content knowledge before exploring historical issues (Shaver 1996). In addition, the growing influence of the standards and testing movement propels some teachers to use coverage-oriented approaches, glossing over important historical questions in an attempt to “get everything in” (some state standards documents demand that students learn an overwhelming amount of information). These are the reasons why expository and superficial coverage continues to characterize the teaching of history.

What are we to do about these trends? With the fields of U.S. history and, particularly, world history so expansive, how do we counteract the incoherent and coverage-oriented curriculum that continues to afflict the social studies while still being responsive to the practical demands of the middle and high school experience? Using “central questions” in the design of issues-centered history units offers us an auspicious possibility.

Issues-centered instruction—an approach seeking to frame difficult questions or problems as the center of the teaching and learning experience—is not a new idea to the social studies, but there are relatively few published articles designed to help teachers implement the idea in their classrooms. Notable exceptions include the writing of Joseph Onosko, an associate professor at the University of New Hampshire. More than a decade ago, he wrote a short piece in this journal that presented a practical model for the design of issues-based units. He followed that with similar pieces, one in Social Education and another that he coauthored in the National Council for the Social Studies’ Handbook on Teaching Social Issues (1996), the most authoritative manual to date on how to implement issues-based curricula. Onosko’s work could not be more relevant to history teachers today. In this article, I draw on Onosko’s model—specifically, his use of the term “central question”—in offering practical strategies for designing and implementing issues-based U.S. and world history units. Although the successful design of issues-based units depends upon the nexus of unit aims, daily activities (lesson plans), and an end-of-unit performance (or culminating) assessment, I focus chiefly on the creation of central questions as a critical feature in the design of history units. I also provide a rationale for and explanation of central questions and a series of criteria to be applied in creating central questions. I present a comparative analysis of two Renaissance units and, in appendices A and B, I offer a series of central ques-

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teachers need to offer students the content knowledge necessary for them to understand various facets of the Great Depression: the philosophy of the New Deal, the “alphabet” programs that represent that philosophy, and the success the programs were having on the United States economy and society. With an effective central question in place, the information presented during the unit about the Depression points toward an important instructional end. At the conclusion of the unit, students would be challenged to apply the information they have learned in an authentic scenario of some kind. For example, a teacher might have students assume the roles of different people affected by the Depression (a farmer, a small business owner, an African American factory worker, a female teacher, and a high school student) and compose a series of diary entries or letters. Students describe what life was like for those people during the Depression and determine whether and how the New Deal affected their economic and social station. Students can then exchange letters with one another through a jigsaw grouping arrangement. As a final assessment, students offer their own opinions on the central question, using the letters and the other information that they learned in the unit to support their arguments.

Central questions not only afford teachers the opportunity to select and organize content in a coherent unit framework but also expose students to an array of issues that are important for young citizens to consider in a democratic society. Presenting historical problems as the basis for student learning challenges students to analyze historical events and decisions to inform their determinations about the present. With their focus on information coverage, traditionally conceived units rarely allow students enough time to see the connections between questions of the past and those of the present. Units framed around central questions create forums in which students can debate the most controversial issues facing our world—war and peace, justice, leadership, progress, and power. They can deliberate about the following questions:

- What is a just war?
- What distinguishes a good from a great leader (or president)?
- What leads to the fall of a great empire?
- How much power should the government have over the lives of its citizens?
- Can an imperialistic foreign policy be justified?
- When should change be considered progress?
- Under what conditions does the United States have an obligation to intervene in the affairs of another nation?

These questions could serve as the basis for an issues-centered history unit.

Central questions can emphasize different historical themes that relate to political, social, economic, cultural, military, or ethical issues relevant to the history of our national and global societies. In a democratic society, central questions that reflect themes of justice, equality, and freedom are particularly important, but teachers should design questions that reflect a variety of important historical themes. When determining whether to focus a 1960–70s unit on the sociocultural implications of domestic turmoil and protest (To what extent can we trust our political leaders during times of war? or When and how should we protest?) or on the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy in containing communism (Was containment an effective foreign policy strategy?), a teacher might consider the central questions created during earlier parts of the school year to ensure that a range of themes is being emphasized.

Although it is important to design central questions that reflect different historical themes, a strong argument exists for using a particularly salient central question in more than one unit. Doing so could serve as a valuable comparison exercise for students, challenging them to compare and analyze perennial issues as they arise in different historical time periods. Furthermore, teachers also should consider the possibility of using more than one central question in a unit, especially when true
understanding of the content in the unit depends on an intersection of ideas or issues. Using multiple central questions in a unit may be tempting for those teachers who find it difficult to focus an entire unit around one question. However, because one of the primary reasons for using central questions is to address the problem of “over-coverage,” teachers should be careful not to sacrifice curricular coherence or in-depth teaching in an attempt to emphasize more than one issue.

Two other features of central questions are important to discuss. First, in history particularly, it is important that central questions follow a chronological sequence. Students need to understand the contextual build-up and draw on what came before to consider a central question thoughtfully. Arranging central questions chronologically also means that teachers can stay within the boundaries of a traditional history curriculum in designing issues-centered units. In fact, as long as teachers are not burdened with unreasonable coverage expectations, they might need only to make some modest revisions to present units to support a central question.

Second, although some proponents of issues-oriented education believe it to be essentially interdisciplinary (see Wraga 1993, 1996, 1999), I believe that central questions should be written to reflect a more intradisciplinary focus. Engle (1989), in fact, acknowledged the practical value of an intradisciplinary issues-based approach in U.S. history. “It is quite possible,” he writes, “to frame a discussion of every period of our history as a nation in terms of one or more issues that not only dominated the life of that period but that, in most cases, persist in some form to the present day” (188).

With that discipline-based approach, teachers are better able to design units that are responsive to the common framework of school or district curricula.

Criteria for Designing Good Central Questions

Not all questions make good central questions. With the organization and focus of the unit and the design of the performance assessment contingent on an effective central question, it is important that teachers take the necessary time to develop a question that meets established criteria. The criteria that I present draw on the previous work of Onosko and Swenson (1996); Evans, Newmann, and Saxe (1996); and Engle (1989).

**Does the question represent an important issue to historical and contemporary times?**

In designing central questions for history courses, teachers should select issues that are fundamental to the historical period. This does not mean, however, that the questions should not have contemporary implications. In designing a unit on ancient Rome, for example, a teacher might decide to use one of the following questions: What makes an empire great? What leads to the end of a great empire? or When is a country considered an ‘empire,’ and are empires necessarily bad? Although ancient Rome is the focus of the content of the unit, the question of empire holds contemporary relevance. With the recent fall of the British Empire and some historians’ contentions that the United States, through its involvement and alleged imperialism in foreign affairs, is reaching, or has already reached, empire status (see Schroeder 2004), the question allows the teacher to draw connections between the ancient and modern worlds. A question used to frame a unit on ancient Greece—Can Athens be considered a democracy?—is another example of a question that holds contemporary implications about what it means to live in a democratic society.

Determining what content is historically and contemporarily significant, and thus what constitutes an appropriate central question for a unit, is typically a difficult exercise. Many periods in history are cluttered with important issues that could be used legitimately as the basis for a good central question. For example, in designing a unit on World War II, one could make a legitimate case for a question about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Was the United States justified in using nuclear weapons on Japan?) or about the shift in foreign policy from isolationism to internationalism (Under what conditions does the United States have an obligation to intervene in a foreign conflict?). In studying early twentieth-century progressivism, all of the following central questions involve subject matter critical to the historical period: Should the government have the right to limit big business? Which of the progressive reforms of the early twentieth century made the most impact on the country? or Were the pioneers of big business really robber barons? Central questions should not be designed to reflect niche issues that, although interesting to consider, do not reflect the most worthwhile and essential subject matter from the historical period. For example, in studying the period preceding the Civil War, it is more important to frame a central question around the nature of the differences between the North and South (Was slavery or states’ rights the primary cause of the Civil War?) or Was the Civil War unavoidable?) than around the 1860 political campaign of Stephen Douglass.

**Is the question debatable?**

The question should be one about which reasonable people can disagree. Students should be able to argue an assigned position without feeling as if they are having to defend the indefensible. For example, asking students to consider whether slavery was consistent with democratic principles is a question unsuitable for a two-way debate. Moreover, such a question may leave some students feeling awkward about having to defend an untenable and morally shameful position. Teachers should also avoid designing central questions that ask students to engage in baseless speculation about historical events. In framing questions for a unit on the Civil War, a question about whether the United States will ever fight another civil war may evoke thinking about the nature of regional, religious, or political differences but will likely lead students to offer speculative, superficial evaluations that fail to draw appropriately on the impor-
tant content of the unit. Instead, if a teacher asks whether the Civil War was fought over states’ rights or slavery, there will be a better framework for the unit.

**Does the question represent a reasonable amount of content?**

When my graduate students are designing issues-based units, they consistently struggle in identifying central questions that represent the most fundamental issues of the time period. They will say, “How can I design good central questions when I’ve never been taught this way?” Indeed, it is difficult to narrow an entire time period down to one question, particularly when, as students and teachers, we have been accustomed to a topical approach to history. For a central question to be successful, however, it must be framed around a limited amount of content, which enables students to explore the question fully.

Considering how uncomfortable teachers are in omitting relevant content, it is tempting to design central questions that are intentionally broad in scope. One former student of mine, who admitted to a commitment to teaching the entire textbook, designed questions for the maximum coverage of information. For a post-Constitution unit, he created the following question: What were the three most significant aspects of each of the first five presidential administrations? That design flaw invites fragmented and incoherent instruction, not unlike what we would find when using a topical unit framework. When confronted with the decision about what content will serve as the basis for a central question, teachers should remember that it is impossible to cover everything of significance. As Onosko and Swenson (1996) argue, “In light of the immense size and contentious nature of the social studies field, it is unlikely that consensus will ever be reached on what counts as an important issue” (91). They wisely refer to social studies teachers to select the most appropriate issues, acknowledging that “even if consensus could be reached, the set of agreed upon issues would probably exceed what could be thoughtfully explored” (91).

Teachers concerned that using central questions excludes too much important historical content should remember that information deemed critical to the course but not relevant to the central question can still be taught during a future unit. This design practice discourages teachers from covering information not relevant to the central question. Moreover, it also offers students an opportunity to reexamine the context and circumstances from a previously learned historical period. A teacher might design a post-Constitution unit around the question, Did the Constitution grant the national government too much power? To allow an in-depth and coherent study of the question, however, the teacher bypassed the Monroe Doctrine. Later in the year, however, the teacher plans to teach a unit in which the students analyze the increasing status of the United States as a world power, using the central question, Did the Spanish-American War and imperialism of the late nineteenth century represent a deviation from American principles? During the future unit, the teacher can teach the Monroe Doctrine as a way to explain the differences between early and late nineteenth-century foreign policy. This arrangement allows the teacher to cover topics in more depth, reduces the number of uncomfortable decisions about what to omit, and establishes more coherence to the curriculum.

**Will the question hold the sustained interest of middle or high school students?**

Because middle and high school students love to argue, the use of central questions is a potentially exciting proposition for teachers comfortable with designing debate-oriented activities and assessments. Asking students to debate the question of whether Hamilton’s vision or Jefferson’s was better for America can spark real interest from students and energize an entire class. However, for students to find the central question worthy of debate, the question must be one that is written in a provocative way. The following world history question on the Holocaust—What were the events leading up to Hitler’s rise to power?—fails to incite any debate or controversy and, as a result, can attenuate students’ interest in and motivation for the unit. An alternative question—Who is at fault for allowing Hitler’s rise to power?—not only implies a more issues-based approach to the teaching of the unit but also is more likely to elicit intense interest from students.

Several other strategies can help further cultivate students’ enthusiasm for the central question:

- Share the question with students at the beginning of the unit. Doing that can give students a better sense of the purpose and shape the unit is to take.
- Invite students early in the unit to offer their initial opinions on the central question—perhaps through a class survey—and brainstorm what additional information is necessary to answer the question more completely.
- Help students see connections between daily lessons in the unit and the central question by asking them: How does what we learned today contribute to our ability to answer the central question? One strategy that I have found particularly helpful in giving students a...
sense of continuity throughout the unit is to use the last five or so minutes of each lesson to ask students to relate how what they learned relates to the central question. In addition, a class discussion, a small-group debate, or a written essay, assigned midway through the unit, brings students to an early evaluation of the question. That strategy keeps the focus on the central question and provides the teacher with a sense of how students are connecting what has been taught during individual lessons.

- Help students make connections between units. For example, in teaching an issues-based unit on Rome (What leads to the fall of a great empire?), the teacher might draw parallels between characteristics of ancient Greece and Rome. The teacher can also address aspects of ancient Greece that were not taught during the previous unit, helping students to see how the issues of one historical period can be applied to those of another. To reveal interunit relationships, history teachers can display various central questions in the appropriate geographical areas on a classroom map. The same could be done with a timeline, with the teacher posting each unit's central question in the appropriate date range. Students can construct a smaller version of the timeline on which they place illustrations or annotations during each unit.

**Is the question appropriately challenging for the students you are teaching?**

Despite the advantages in exploring central questions in depth, issues-based units place the onus on teachers to seek out supplementary resources (primary resources, additional readings, and so forth) to assist in their preparation for the unit and in their students' understanding of the central question. With the Internet, much is available at the touch of a mouse, but not all of that material is suitable for student use, particularly younger students or those who may have difficulty reading. For units that do require substantial outside resources, teachers should do some investigating before deciding to use a central question. Furthermore, it is important that the materials selected are not targeted to persuade students of the teachers' ideological position on the central question. As Onosko and Swenson (1996) point out, "Successful issue analysis requires materials that reflect the perspectives and underlying rationales of the competing 'camps', not just the viewpoint of one side or a very select few" (92). In some cases, central questions may be written to support thoughtful inquiry, but the nature of the materials made available to students impedes their ability to consider both sides of the argument. That is not always the fault of the teacher, because some materials may not be accessible or appropriate for classroom use. Teachers struggling to find materials to support central questions should review the "Taking Sides" series that presents alternative perspectives on various historical questions. Although the readings in that text are probably not appropriate for most middle school students, teachers can consult the texts for useful ideas about central questions.

**Two Renaissance Units**

To illustrate the design differences between a traditionally conceived unit and an issues-centered unit, I offer a unit on the Renaissance designed for tenth-grade students. With only The Renaissance as the central topic of the unit, there is no end in mind except the coverage of related facts about the Renaissance. In fact, because most Renaissance units include a significant amount of information on the Protestant Reformation, a traditional unit typically splits time between the two interrelated events. Thus, if the aim of the unit is to cover all the important information about the Renaissance and Reformation, the inclusion of the following topics is necessary: the origins of the Renaissance on the Italian peninsula; the political, scientific, and artistic figures and their respective contributions; the technological innovations made during the period and their effects on Western civilization; the change in the status of women during the period; the implications of Renaissance thought on the rise of nation-states; the role that humanism played in the spawning of the Protestant Reformation; the major Christian reformers and the influence they had on the spread of Protestantism; the origins of the Church of England; the occurrence and implications of the Counter Reformation; and finally, the causes and events leading up to the Thirty Years War. The teacher might conclude the unit with a culminating assessment requiring students to research one of the key Renaissance or Reformation figures, write an expository essay that explains the figure’s significance, and present their findings to the class.

Contrast this traditional unit with an issues-centered unit based on the question, Should we classify the Renaissance as a period of progress or only change? The unit has a specific beginning, perhaps with the teacher asking the students to compare and contrast the terms change and progress and to offer some contemporary examples that distinguish between change and progress. The unit continues with a comparison of Renaissance and Middle Age thought,
with an emphasis on whether the shift in worldview represented a positive or negative development for those living at that time. Not unlike in a traditional unit, the teacher then considers a select number of artistic, scientific, technological, literary, or religious developments, including the Reformation; investigates what effects those had on fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century life; and classifies the developments as examples of progress or change. As a culminating assessment, students support or refute a textbook description of the Renaissance as a time of immense progress; formally debate the central question in small groups; and, citing evidence from class as well as the debate, write a follow-up essay that argues for or against the Renaissance as a time of progress.

Although designed to cover the same time period, the two units are substantially different. Without a central question in place, the first unit is beset by the extensive amount of content to be covered. That problem often leads to an incoherent unit design that leaves students wondering how one lesson connects with another. As a result of the unit’s incoherence, designing a summative performance assessment that represents the breadth of information covered in the unit becomes very difficult. Perhaps more important, coverage concerns preclude the teacher from highlighting important issues or problems that relate to the content being studied. As Onosko and Svenson (1996) conclude, “Students are reduced to consumers of fragmented bits of information and ideas rather than challenged to become productive thinkers and problem solvers” (90). This is particularly problematic in world history, where the amount of information to be covered is so overwhelming that, often, teachers are left with little time to engage students in controversial areas that make teaching and learning history so exciting and challenging. “We have to move on” becomes a common refrain for teachers with coverage concerns.

By designing the Renaissance unit around a central question, a teacher can change the nature of teaching and learning in a world history classroom. With the central question guiding the development of the unit, a teacher can design daily activities to reflect the question and structure the performance assessment to challenge students to offer an evaluative judgment on the question, using the information learned during the unit. Important in this issues-based unit is the teaching of worthwhile content about the Renaissance and Reformation, which is critical to its design. The difference, however, is the amount of information covered. To design an effective issues-based unit, a teacher needs not only to create a worthwhile central question to guide the unit but also to design daily activities that will provide students ample time to assimilate the information, raise questions, and relate what was taught to the central question. Without allowing for the necessary time to cultivate interest and thought about the material being presented, the teacher is left to present a hodgepodge of events, names, and topics that students have trouble connecting at the end of the unit.

It is also important to note that although I chose to emphasize the distinction between progress and change as the central question in this unit, several other controversial questions could be used to guide a unit on the Renaissance. Examples follow:

- Were the most significant changes during the Renaissance political, social, cultural, or religious?
- Should Martin Luther be considered a hero or heretic?
- Is the printing press the most important contribution of the Reformation?
- How much influence should religious officials have in the affairs of the state?
- Were the changes brought about by the Renaissance inevitable? (this might serve an advanced class particularly well)

Each of these debatable questions offer students an intellectually challenging and engaging learning experience on the Renaissance. Those central questions can be used by teachers concerned with meeting district curricular goals or state standards, but the difficult questions about coverage remain. No matter which central question a teacher determines to be most appropriate for a Renaissance unit, themes of progress and religious authority are fundamental to all the questions, inviting teachers to make meaningful connections between required content and the issues framing the unit.

Conclusion

Issues-based unit planning is not easy, particularly in light of the way teachers are accustomed to designing most history units. In appendices A and B, I offer central questions for U.S. history and world history courses. Teachers need to use discretion in selecting central questions from the comprehensive list, choosing those that best represent their course goals and correspond with state standards and district or departmental guidelines. In some cases, it may be appropriate to design a unit around more than one central question, especially when true understanding of the content in the unit depends on an intersection of ideas or issues. I created the questions after consulting several U.S. history textbooks, the Indiana U.S. history standards, several world history textbooks, and the Indiana world history and civilization standards. By including so many central questions, I am not in any way implying that it is appropriate to teach this number of units in a yearlong course.

For this approach to be successful in practical settings, teachers must be committed to the maxim that information coverage is not the primary goal in designing effective history units. Teaching everything about ancient Rome, the Renaissance, or the U.S. Civil War does not mean that students develop a deep understanding of the significance of those historical events. For teachers to assume that they can teach students all there is to know about history is folly and negatively affects the ability to design a curriculum that is challenging and engaging for students. Using central questions in the construction of units is an alternative design practice that places a premium on debatable and controver-
sical issues arising from history. Among the myriad challenges to success with that strategy is the coverage-oriented approach advanced by the social studies and history standards in some states. Despite those challenges, issues-based instruction and, more specifically, the use of central questions offer numerous potential benefits to history teachers interested in a break from a textbook-based unit-titles approach to designing a unit.

Key words: designing a social studies unit, designing a world history unit, fostering debate with central questions, using central questions in social studies

APPENDIX A
Converting a Textbook’s Unit Titles into Central Questions in United States History

New World Exploration
Should the United States celebrate Columbus Day?
Should European explorers be praised or indicted for colonizing America?
Who has the right to claim unexplored land?

Colonization
To what extent were the colonies united before the American Revolution?

The American Revolution
Was the American Revolution justified?
Who or what is most responsible for winning the American Revolution?

The Constitution
Did the Constitution grant the national government too much power?
Did the Founding Fathers make too many compromises to ratify the Constitution?

The New Nation
Was Hamilton’s or Jefferson’s vision better for America?

Jacksonian Democracy
Should President Jackson be ranked in the top tier of United States presidents?
Is Jackson responsible for a growth in American democracy?

Manifest Destiny
Who was to blame for the outbreak of the Mexican War?

“The Peculiar Institution”
Did slavery destroy the African American family?
Was slavery a moral or economic question in pre–Civil War America?

The Civil War
Was slavery or states’ rights the primary cause of the Civil War?
Was the Civil War unavoidable?
What person or event is most responsible for the North winning the Civil War?

Reconstruction
Did Reconstruction succeed or fail?
Did Reconstruction further divide the nation?

The United States Becomes a World Power
Did the Spanish-American War and imperialism of the late nineteenth century represent a deviation of American principles?
Can imperialism be justified?

Progressivism
Did the rise of big business help or hurt America?
Is the responsibility of the government to limit the actions of big business?
Did America embrace the Progressive agenda?

World War I
Under what conditions does the United States have an obligation to intervene in world affairs?
Should the Senate have approved Wilson’s League of Nations?
Did World War I make “the world safe for democracy”?

The Great Depression
To what extent was the New Deal successful in addressing the problems caused by the Great Depression?
Was the New Deal most successful in addressing the goal of relief, recovery, or reform?
What is the appropriate role for the government to play in regulating the economy?

World War II
Could World War II have been prevented?
Was the United States justified in using nuclear weapons against Japan?
Did President Roosevelt have the right to intern Japanese Americans during World War II?
Who is to blame for the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

The Cold War
Was containment an effective foreign policy strategy?
How should we rank Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson in containing the Soviet threat?
Did the Soviet Union represent a real (or overblown) threat to freedom around the world?

The Vietnam War
Could we just have pulled out of Vietnam?
Did Vietnam need to be saved from communism?
Which President is most responsible for the failings in Vietnam?

The Civil Rights Movement
What is the most effective form of protest?
To what extent were the aims of the Civil Rights Movement realized?
How should history remember Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X?

APPENDIX B
Converting a Textbook’s Unit Titles into Central Questions in World History

Beginnings of Human Society
Which artifacts give us the most important information about prehistoric times?
Which hominid groups should we consider the most representative examples of early human communities?
What myths are true and untrue about early human communities?
Can the achievements of the Neolithic Age be considered more or less revolutionary than those of the Industrial Revolution?
Should we consider the invention of agriculture the beginning of human civilization?

Mesopotamia
What aspects comprise a “successful” civilization?
How did the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers influence every aspect of Mesopotamian civilization?
Was Hammurabi’s Code just?
Which of the early Mesopotamian civilizations contributed most to other ancient civilizations?
Are worship practices, such as those prac-
Ancient Greece
Does Alexander deserve the title “the Great”?
Was Athens really a democracy?
Should Athens and Sparta be considered allies or enemies?
Was it the heroism of the Greeks or the ineptness of the Persians that led to the defeat of the Persian Empire?
Rank the importance of politics, religion, war, art, and philosophy to the legacy of a nation/empire.

Ancient Rome
Should Caesar have crossed the Rubicon?
To what extent can popular revolts change the economic or political conditions for a group of people?
Did the Roman Republic represent a more populist form of government than Athenian democracy?
How important was geography to the success of the Roman Empire?
How should empires treat the people whom they conquer?
Can slave revolts that result in killing (such as the one instigated by Spartacus in 73 BCE) be morally justified?
How would you compare the empires of Rome, Greece, Macedonia, and Persia?
Was the Roman Empire the greatest?
How can the Circus Maximus explain the different facets of Roman economic, political, and social life?
Was Rome’s first true emperor its best?
Why is the transfer of political power such a thorny issue for nations?
Why are some nations successful while others are not?
What leads to the fall of a great empire?

The Rise of Christianity
Why was early Christianity so threatening to the Roman Empire?
Why did Christianity catch on so quickly after the death of Jesus?

The Byzantine Empire
Was the shared power arrangement between the Eastern and Western Roman Empire destined to fail?
How could the Western Roman Empire fall so quickly while the Eastern Empire flourished for another thousand years?
Did Byzantium restore the former glory of the Roman Empire?
In reigning after the collapse of the Western Empire, are Justinian’s accomplishments overshadowed by earlier Roman emperors?

The Spread of Islam
Was Mohammed a man of peace or war?
How much of the present conflict between Shiites and Sunnis is related to the original schism?
Is it fair to say that the Muslim Empire was spread by the “sword of Islam”?
How should the Muslim Empire be remembered—as one of violence or mense achievement?

Early African Societies
Is the notion of the African “tribe” the best way to look at the social and political structure of early and/or Middle Age African civilizations?
It is indisputable that Europeans bear the chief responsibility for the slave trade.
To what extent and for what reasons were Africans complicit in the slave trade?
Where does the use of the camel rank as one of the most important developments in early African civilizations?
Were the consequences of the slave trade more severe for African women or men?
Why do civilizations fall (use Ghana, Mali, and Songhai as case studies)?
What were the most significant long-term effects of slavery on African civilization?
What was the primary reason Islam took hold in many African countries?

Mesopotamia
How would you rank the success of the Mayan, Inca, and Aztec civilizations?
Vastly outnumbered, how can we explain Pizarro and Cortes’s conquests of the Incas and Aztecs?

Europe in the Middle Ages
Was feudalism primarily an economic, social, or political structure?
Should Gregory the Great be considered the most important medieval pope?
Can religious wars ever be justified?
Was Christendom united both spiritually and politically?
Rather than “The Middle Ages” or “Medieval Period,” what other names could we use to title this era?
Did the Catholic Church do more harm than good during the Middle Ages?
How much power and authority should religious officials have in affairs of the state?

Renaissance and Reformation
Were the changes brought about during the Renaissance inevitable?
Were the most significant changes during the Renaissance political, social, cultural, or religious?
Should Martin Luther be considered a hero or heretic?
Should the printing press be considered the most important contribution of the Renaissance?
To what extent is the Renaissance responsible for the Reformation?

The Age of Exploration
Was Magellan the greatest of fifteen- to eighteenth-century explorers?
Which technological innovation was most influential in transoceanic exploration?
Should the Age of Exploration be remembered primarily as three centuries of racism and imperialism or as a time of
innovation and discovery?
If you had to include ten events on a historical timeline of the Age of Exploration, what would they be?
The Age of Absolutism
Is absolutism more consistent with natural law than democracy?
Would you conclude that the reign of Louis XIV was as "brilliant" as his nickname suggests?
Why was religion such an important element in the period leading up to and throughout the Age of Absolutism?
Was Peter the Great's cruelty essential to his success?
Can despotic rule be used to achieve freedom for a nation's people?
The Enlightenment
Is the term "Enlightened Despot" an oxymoron?
Who is the best example of an Enlightened Despot?
Can the Enlightenment be best evaluated as a successful scientific or political movement?
Revolutions in Europe and the Americas
How much impact did philosophy have on the French and American Revolutions?
What conditions make a society ripe for revolution?
How does one create a free society?
How can one explain the success of the American Revolution and the failure of the French Revolution when both were based on the same philosophical principles?
The Industrial Revolution
What was the most important invention to emerge from the Industrial Revolution in Europe? In the United States?
Was the Industrial Revolution a mixed blessing for European and American societies?
Can the achievements of the Neolithic Age be considered more or less revolutionary than those of the Industrial Revolution?
If you had to include ten achievements on a historical timeline of the Industrial Revolution, what would they be and why?
The Muslim Empires
How has the notion of a “jihad” changed in the Muslim world?
Are the Crusades the most reprehensible example of a “religious war”?
Was the Ottoman Empire the most successful of the Muslim Empires?
How did different caliphates distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslims?
The East Asian World
In looking at the Sung through the Ching dynasties, what were the most important factors for the success of a dynasty?
Was internal or external conflict chiefly responsible for the collapse of the Chinese monarchy?
What was the most important reason for the fall of the Tokugawas government?
Are the cinematic depictions of the samurai accurate?
Global Imperialism
How did the British and Roman Empires compare in size, strength, and governance?
Can colonization or imperialism be justified?
How closely did the explanations for imperialism correspond with actual motivations?
World War I
Did World War I make “the world safe for democracy”?
Was the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand the primary reason for the start of World War I?
Was the new technology used during World War I the most influential factor in the Allies’ victory?
Would the Allies have achieved victory without the United States’ entry into the war?
Were the postwar rewards and retributions fair and/or deserved?
The Russian Revolution
Can violent revolutions ever lead to positive change for a country?
What was the primary reason for the Bolshevik victory?
Were the Bolsheviks genuinely interested in political change in the Soviet Union or just in obtaining power for themselves?
The Rise of Dictatorships
Can we say that brutal dictatorships, such as those of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, are a thing of the past?
What reasons best explain the rise of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin?
Should Lenin and Stalin be viewed as equally destructive dictators?
The Holocaust
Should the German people be assigned any blame for the atrocities committed during the Holocaust?
What heroes emerged from the time period surrounding the Holocaust?
What is the greatest lesson learned from the Holocaust?
World War II
Could World War II have been prevented?
Was the United States justified in using nuclear weapons against Japan?
Did the United States’ use of weapons against Japan increase the likelihood of such weapons being used again in the future?
Should the United States have entered World War II sooner than it did?
The Cold War
Did the Soviet Union (and/or communism) represent a real (or overblown) threat to freedom around the world?
What prevented the United States and the Soviet Union from going to war during the decades spanning the cold war?
How closely did the Soviet Union’s “satellite” countries associate themselves with the policies and practices of their mother country?
What United States president was most adept in handling cold war politics?
Communist China
How close are the similarities between Mao and Josef Stalin?
What was the primary reason for the fall of the Nationalists to the Communists?
What was the most devastating effect of China’s Cultural Revolution?
The Collapse of the Soviet Union
How much credit should President Reagan be given for the fall of the Soviet Union?
Is a truly communist state possible?
Was Gorbachev right to initiate the perestroika and glasnost reforms?
Dictatorships and Democracy in Latin America
How real was the Cuban threat to the security of the United States?
Was the United States justified in helping to remove President Arbenz from Guatemala?
How responsible is the United States for the guillotine and human rights abuses in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s?
How successful was the Liberation Theology movement in effecting socioeconomic change in Latin America?
Which policies and practices had the most success in improving conditions for the poor in Latin American countries?
The Struggle for Independence in Africa
What were the most significant and lasting effects of Western imperialism on African nations (particularly those in the South)?
Should the West be more active in assisting in the postcolonial democratization efforts in Africa? If so, how?
Has Pan-Africanism been a failure?
How do the protest movements in African nations compare to those in Latin America, Asia, and other places around the world?
What should be done to address the crises of AIDS and child mortality in Africa?
Has the struggle for democratic reform in Africa been a failure?
The Struggle for Independence in East and Southeast Asia
How should the Kashmir conflict be resolved?
Should China recognize Taiwan as an independent nation?
Was the Vietnamese war an impossible war for the United States to win?
Is the Pakistani-Indian nuclear threat the most dangerous in the world today?
Can the burdens of Bangladesh's geogra-
phy be overcome?

The Israeli-Arab Conflict

Can religious principles ever be advanced by violent means?

Should Israel return the land taken during the Six Day War?

How would you evaluate the political success of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under Arafat’s leadership?

What is the relationship between Arab countries and the PLO?

Which Israeli leader has been the most sensible in handling the Israeli-Arab conflict?

Other questions related to contemporary and historical issues

Is slavery the greatest stain in human history?

Was it right to invade Iraq in 2003?

Is the United Nations no longer relevant?

What is the enduring lesson of the September 11 terrorist attacks?

How has the notion of Empire changed throughout history?

Who are the winners and losers in a globalized economy?

Should the United States endorse an International War Crimes Tribunal?

Who are history’s winners and losers?

Is world history too focused on Western civilizations?

Should the United States lift its embargo on Cuba?

Is the United States an empire?

Under what conditions should foreign nations intervene in a foreign conflict?

Is the world ignoring the atrocities being committed in the Sudan?

NOTES

1. The central questions were created in consultation with several United States history textbooks as well as the Indiana United States history standards.

2. The central questions were created in consultation with several world history textbooks as well as the Indiana world history and civilization standards.

REFERENCES


