

Essential Questions in Teaching American History

by John McNamara

A carefully crafted lesson is structured with a well-defined focus and a clearly-stated purpose. The lesson should present the class with an issue that is phrased in the form of a problem to be solved or a question to be analyzed and assessed by the class. Effective lessons do not merely cover information; they present students with major concepts and ideas and challenge students to think critically and take positions on open-ended essential questions. Here are some examples of essential questions for students of American history:

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1. Is America a land of opportunity?
2. Did geography greatly affect the development of colonial America?
3. Does a close relationship between church and state lead to a more moral society?
4. Has Puritanism shaped American values?
5. Was colonial America a democratic society?
6. Was slavery the basis of freedom in colonial America?
7. Did Great Britain lose more than it gained from its victory in the French and Indian War?
8. Were the colonists justified in resisting British policies after the French and Indian War?
9. Was the American War for Independence inevitable?
10. Would you have been a revolutionary in 1776?
11. Did the Declaration of Independence establish the foundation of American government?
12. Was the American Revolution a “radical” revolution?
13. Did the Articles of Confederation provide the United States with an effective government?
14. Could the Constitution be written without compromise?
15. Does state or federal government have a greater impact on our lives? (federalism)
16. Does the system of checks and balances provide us with an effective and efficient government? Do separation of powers and checks and balances make our government work too slowly?
17. Is a strong federal system the most effective government for the United States? Which level of government, federal or state, can best solve our nation’s problems?
18. Is the Constitution a living document? (amendment process, elastic clause, judicial interpretation, legislative modifications, etc.)
19. Was George Washington’s leadership indispensable in successfully launching the new federal government?
20. Should the United States fear a national debt? (financial problems of the new nation and Hamilton’s financial plan)
21. Whose ideas were best for the new nation, Hamilton’s or Jefferson’s?
22. Are political parties good for our nation? (Federalists v. Democratic-Republicans)
23. Should the United States seek alliances with other nations?
24. Should the political opposition have the right to criticize a president’s foreign policy?
25. Is the suppression of public opinion during times of crisis ever justified?
26. Should we expect elections to bring about revolutionary changes? (election of 1800)
27. Is economic coercion an effective method of achieving our national interest in world affairs?
28. Should the United States fight to preserve the right of its citizens to travel and trade overseas?

29. Does war cause national prosperity?
30. Was the Monroe Doctrine a policy of expansion or self-defense? Or: Was the Monroe Doctrine a “disguise” for American imperialism?
31. Should presidents’ appointees to the Supreme Court reflect their policies?
32. Did the Supreme Court under John Marshall give too much power to the federal government (at the expense of the states)?
33. Does an increase in the number of voters make a country more democratic?
34. Should the United States have allowed American Indians to retain their tribal identities?
35. Does a geographic minority have the right to ignore the laws of a national majority?
36. Did Andrew Jackson advance or retard the cause of democracy? (autocrat v. democrat)
37. Was the age of Jackson an age of democracy?
38. Should the states have the right to ignore the laws of the national government?
39. Does the United States have a mission to expand freedom and democracy?
40. Have reformers had a significant impact on the problems of American society?
41. Does militancy advance or retard the goals of a protest movement? (abolitionists) Or: Were the abolitionists responsible reformers or irresponsible agitators?
42. Was slavery a benign or evil institution?
43. Can legislative compromises solve moral issues?
44. Can the Supreme Court settle moral issues? (*Dred Scott* decision)
45. Was slavery the primary cause of the Civil War?
46. Was the Civil War inevitable?
47. Does Abraham Lincoln deserve to be called the “Great Emancipator”?
48. Was the Civil War worth its costs?
49. Was it possible to have a peace of reconciliation after the Civil War?
50. Should the South have been treated as a defeated nation or as rebellious states? (a comparison of the presidential and congressional reconstruction programs)
51. Did the Reconstruction governments rule the South well?
52. Can political freedom exist without an economic foundation?
53. When should a president be impeached and removed from office?
54. Does racial equality depend upon government action?
55. Should African Americans have more strongly resisted the government’s decision to abandon the drive for equality? (Booker T. Washington’s “accommodation” v. W.E.B. Du Bois’s “agitation” approaches)
56. Has rapid industrial development been a blessing or a curse for Americans?
57. Were big business leaders “captains of industry” or “robber barons?”
58. Should business be regulated closely by the government?
59. Should business be allowed to combine and reduce competition?
60. Can workers attain economic justice without violence?
61. Did America fulfill the dreams of immigrants?
62. Has immigration been the key to America’s success?
63. Has the West been romanticized?
64. Can the “white man’s conquest” of Native Americans be justified?
65. Have Native Americans been treated fairly by the United States government?
66. Who was to blame for the problems of American farmers after the Civil War? Or: Was the farmers’ revolt of the 1890s justified?
67. Did populism provide an effective solution to the nation’s problems?
68. Is muckraking an effective tool to reform American politics and society?
69. Can reform movements improve American society and politics? (Progressivism)

70. Were the Progressives successful in making government more responsive to the will of the people?
71. Does government have a responsibility to help the needy?
72. To what extent had African Americans attained the "American Dream" by the early twentieth century?
73. Is a strong president good for our nation? (Theodore Roosevelt) Or: Did Theodore Roosevelt further the goals of Progressivism?
74. Was the "New Freedom" an effective solution to the problems of industrialization?
75. Was American expansion overseas justified?
76. Did the press cause the Spanish-American War?
77. Was the United States justified in going to war against Spain in 1898?
78. Should the United States have acquired possessions overseas?
79. Was the acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone an act of justifiable imperialism?
80. Does the need for self-defense give the US the right to interfere in the affairs of Latin America? (Roosevelt Corollary, "Dollar Diplomacy," "Watchful Waiting")
81. Was the United States imperialistic in the Far East?
82. Was world war inevitable in 1914?
83. Was it possible for the US to maintain neutrality in World War I?
84. Should the United States fight wars to make the world safe for democracy? Or: Should the United States have entered World War I?
85. Should a democratic government tolerate dissent during times of war and other crises? (*Schenck v. United States*, *Abrams v. United States*)
86. Was the Treaty of Versailles a fair and effective settlement for lasting world peace?
87. Should the United States have approved the Treaty of Versailles?
88. Was American foreign policy during the 1920s isolationist or internationalist?
89. Was the decade of the 1920s a decade of innovation or conservatism?
90. Did the Nineteenth Amendment radically change women's role in American life?
91. Did women experience significant liberation during the 1920s? Or: Did the role of women in American life significantly change during the 1920s?
92. Should the United States limit immigration?
93. Should the United States have enacted the Prohibition Amendment?
94. Does economic prosperity result from tax cuts and minimal government?
95. Was the Great Depression inevitable?
96. Was the New Deal an effective response to the depression?
97. Did Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal weaken or save capitalism?
98. Did Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal undermine the constitutional principles of separation of powers and checks and balances?
99. Did minorities receive a New Deal in the 1930s?
100. Do labor unions and working people owe a debt to the New Deal?
101. Did the New Deal effectively end the Great Depression and restore prosperity?
102. Has the United States abandoned the legacy of the New Deal?
103. Did United States foreign policy during the 1930s help promote World War II? Or: Could the United States have prevented the outbreak of World War II?
104. Should the United States sell arms to other nations? Or: Should the United States have aided the Allies against the Axis powers? Or: Does American security depend upon the survival of its allies?
105. Was war between the United States and Japan inevitable?
106. How important was the home front in the United States' victory in World War II?
107. Was the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II justified or an unfortunate setback for democracy?

108. Should the US employ atomic (nuclear) weapons to defeat its enemies in war? (President Truman's decision to drop the atom bomb on Japan)
109. Could the United States have done more to prevent the Holocaust?
110. Was World War II a "good war?" Or: Was World War II justified by its results?
111. Was the Cold War inevitable?
112. Was containment an effective policy to thwart communist expansion?
113. Should the United States have feared internal communist subversion in the 1950s?
114. Were the 1950s a time of great peace, progress, and prosperity for Americans?
115. Did the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s expand democracy for all Americans?
116. Should the United States have fought "limited wars" to contain communism? (Korean conflict)
117. Should President Kennedy have risked nuclear war to remove missiles from Cuba?
118. Does the image of John F. Kennedy outshine the reality?
119. Did American presidents have good reasons to fight a war in Vietnam?
120. Can domestic protest affect the outcome of war?
121. Did the war in Vietnam bring a domestic revolution to the United States?
122. Did the "Great Society" programs fulfill their promises?
123. Is civil disobedience the most effective means of achieving racial equality?
124. Is violence or non-violence the most effective means to achieve social change?
125. Did the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s effectively change the nation?
126. Do the ideas of the 1960s still have relevance today?
127. Has the women's movement for equality in the United States become a reality or remained a dream?
128. Did the Warren Supreme Court expand or undermine the concept of civil liberties?
129. Should affirmative action programs be used as a means to make up for past injustices?
130. Was the Watergate scandal a sign of strength or weakness in the United States system of government? Or: Should Nixon have resigned the presidency?
131. Should the president be able to wage war without congressional authorization?
132. Did participation in the Vietnam War signal the return to a foreign policy of isolation for the United States?
133. Did the policy of detente with communist nations effectively maintain world peace?
134. Is secrecy more important than the public's right to know in implementing foreign policy? (Bay of Pigs invasion, 1961; clandestine CIA operations; Pentagon Papers court case, 1971; Iran-Contra affair; invasion of Panama, 1989; etc.)
135. Should a president be permitted to conduct a covert foreign policy?
136. Did the policies of the Reagan administration strengthen or weaken the United States?
137. Should human rights and morality be the cornerstones of US foreign policy? Or: Should the United States be concerned with human rights violations in other nations?)
138. Were Presidents Reagan and Bush responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War? Did the United States win the Cold War?
139. Are peace and stability in the Middle East vital to the United States' economy and national security?
140. Should the United States have fought a war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait?
141. Is it the responsibility of the United States today to be the world's "policeman?"
142. Can global terrorism be stopped?
143. Does the United States have a fair and effective immigration policy?
144. Should the United States restrict foreign trade?
145. Has racial equality and harmony been achieved at the start of the twenty-first century?
146. Should the United States still support the use of economic sanctions to further democracy and human rights?

147. Should the federal surplus be used to repay the government's debts or given back to the people in tax cuts?
148. Should Bill Clinton be considered an effective president?
149. Should a president be impeached for ethical lapses and moral improprieties?
150. Should the United States use military force to support democracy in Eastern Europe? In the Middle East?
151. Is it constitutional for the United States to fight preemptive wars? Was the United States justified to fight a war to remove Saddam Hussein from power?
152. Can the United States maintain its unprecedented prosperity? (policies of the Federal Reserve System; balancing the Federal budget; international trade and the global economy; inflation factor; etc.)
153. Is the world safer since the end of the Cold War?
154. Should Americans be optimistic about the future?
155. Should we change the way that we elect our presidents?
156. Has the president become too powerful? Or the Supreme Court?
157. Should limits be placed on freedom of expression during times of national crisis?
158. Should stricter laws regulating firearms be enacted?
159. Should affirmative action programs be continued to overcome the effects of past injustice and discrimination?
160. Is the death penalty (capital punishment) a "cruel and unusual punishment" (and thus unconstitutional)?
161. Does the media have too much influence over public opinion?
162. Should lobbies and pressure groups be more strictly regulated?
163. Do political parties serve the public interest and further the cause of democracy?

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