

## Table of Contents Volume 6 Number 1 Winter-Spring, 2006

<i>Critique of the NYS Regents Examination in US History</i> by Craig Thurtell .....	2
<b>The Meaning of Character Education</b>	
<i>Integrating Excellence and Ethics in Character Education</i> by Matthew Davidson and Thomas Lickona ...	5
<i>Integrating Character Education into the Social Studies Curriculum</i> by Casey Jakubowski .....	9
<i>Character Education in New Jersey Schools</i> by Philip Brown and Maurice Elias .....	10
<i>Documenting Character Education in the Uniondale School District</i> by Cynthia Curtis-Seinik <i>et al</i> .....	13
<i>Lou Gehrig, the Iron Horse - Character Education from the National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum</i> ....	16
<i>Sometimes Character Education Lacks Character: The CEP and its Eleven Principles</i> by John Staudt .....	19
<i>Concerns about Character Education</i> by Alan Singer and Judith Kaufman .....	21
<i>A Personal View of Family, Character and Morality</i> by Jessica Trubek .....	25
<i>Teachers Join the Debate Over Character Education</i> .....	26
<b>Global Interactions - Global Voyagers, circa 750-1750</b>	
<i>A Social Studies Approach to Teaching Global History</i> by Alan Singer .....	30
<i>Global New Jersey: Teaching and Learning in Global Times</i> by William Gaudelli .....	33
<i>Pyramids of Egypt and Mexico: Cultural Diffusion or Parallel Development?</i> .....	35
<i>Buddhism and Cultural Exchange along the Asian Silk Road</i> by Martin Amster and Lier Chen .....	36
<i>DBQ: Why was the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) so Devastating to European Society?</i> .....	38
<i>An Islamic View of the Battle with Christendom</i> by Michael Pezone with Sharissa Khan .....	42
<i>Islamic Spain: A Photo Essay</i> .....	47
<i>Teaching Packages on Global Transformation from Jackdaw</i> .....	49
<i>Global Voyagers: The Travels of Ibn Battuta, Bar Sauma and Marco Polo</i> .....	50
<i>Admiral Zheng He Voyages Across the Indian Ocean, 1405-1433</i> .....	60
<i>A Grossly Unequal "Exchange": Looting, Slavery and Capitalism Transform the World</i> by Alan Singer ..	62
<i>Pre-Columbian Mayan Civilization: A Photo Essay</i> .....	66
<i>Christopher Columbus: Extracts from the 1492 Journal and Picturing the Columbian Exchange</i> .....	68
<i>Talking with Children about the Columbian Exchange</i> by Lynette Fields and Judith Y. Singer .....	71
<i>Gabriel Sagard-Theodat Describes North America</i> edited by April Francis and Vanessa Marchese .....	74
<i>The Life of Olaudah Equiano</i> by Douglas Cioffi and Emily White .....	76
<i>Film and the Teaching of Global History</i> by Norman Markowitz .....	81
<i>Introducing the Authors</i> .....	84

# Critique of the NYS Regents Examination in US History

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This is an abridged version of a longer essay. The author welcomes responses and can provide citations. As pressure builds for national assessment, these issues are of growing concern for all social studies teachers.

“In England at this day, if elections were open to all classes of people, the property of the landed proprietors would be insecure. An agrarian law would soon take place. If these observations be just, our government ought to secure the permanent interests of the country against innovation. Landholders ought to have a share in the government, to support these valuable interests and to balance and check the other. They ought to be so constituted as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.” When James Madison spoke at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, his subject was the function of the United States Senate. Has the New York State Regents US History and Government exam (USH&G) ever asked students to understand that the authors of the Constitution were, as Madison’s remark makes clear, fearful of democracy? The answer, of course, is never.

Over 3,000 Blacks were lynched in the US South between 1880 and 1930. The 492 victims killed by mobs in Texas surpassed the number of lynchings in the other twelve states that comprised the Far West. When has the USH&G required students to appreciate the *enormity* of lynching in America? Again, it never has.

This account describes the slaughter that the US inflicted on the entire peninsula of Korea between 1950 and 1953: “The total number of people killed was almost certainly well over 3 million - possibly more like 4 million - in a nation whose population was some 30 million when the war started. Although these figures may seem high, if one takes into account the almost unbelievable intensity of the bombing, the shortage of medical facilities, the lack of food and the extreme cold and lack of shelter in the context of a scorched-earth policy and the systematic destruction of livestock, they are not implausible.” The Regents exam has never regarded this ghastly devastation as necessary knowledge, nor have Regents exam writers ever deemed the US-inflicted carnage in Vietnam essential.

Here is a sampling of essay questions you will never see on a Regents exam: How democratic was the Constitution that was ratified in 1788? To what extent were the slaves responsible for their liberation during the Civil War? Was the US justified in fighting the war in Vietnam? The evaluation of such important and debatable issues is beyond the scope of Regents concerns. Evaluative thinking itself is, in fact, off limits.

Understanding the past enables us to make sense of the present. Teachers of US history have the unique obligation to equip our students with the knowledge and understanding to think critically about contemporary events, but students will do so only if we give them the opportunity to apply a full account of US history to today’s controversies. History students must be equipped to judge the past - after all, historians do it all the time. But they cannot do so unless they have learned enough to recognize that there is something to judge. When they discover the knowledge needed to evaluate the American past, they will in the process have learned how to evaluate contemporary events as well. Students must become truth seekers. The search for historical truth, or the closest approximation to it we can achieve, is what historians are about. Without it, we are left with the distortions and manipulations of public memory, passed down the generations by editorialists, politicians, veterans’ and other organizations, even complicit historians. Without a

grasp of historical truth, in all its rich complexity, we are vulnerable to the propagandists of our own time.

Unfortunately, teachers who are guided by the skills and knowledge for which the USH&G holds students responsible will not encourage truth-seeking critical thought. To some degree, the test’s importance unavoidably shapes the way teachers instruct their students. For many students the course and the exam that guides it will be their last experience with the study of US history, magnifying the harmful consequences. Notwithstanding a teacher’s best efforts, the test’s shortcomings can limit and distort students’ comprehension and impede their ability to understand contemporary events in a historical context.

## History is Complex

What exactly is wrong with the USH&G? For one thing, it makes history simple. Yet history is complex; its complexity is, in fact, one of the discipline’s main attractions. The USH&G authors appear to be under orders to avoid complications, an aim plausibly motivated by the need to maintain acceptable passing

rates in the state's deplorably under funded and impoverished districts. Moreover, the simplification is largely accomplished through an airbrushing away of the less flattering strands of America's past. This process of simplifying and cleansing is guided by a series of fundamental assumptions, of which the following are central: that the US political system, created by the wisdom of freedom-loving founders, nurtures an exceptional democracy; that the genius of the US Constitution has provided the necessary corrections to a limited number of historic injustices, and will similarly resolve any current or future lapses from the democratic norm; that US behavior abroad has not only been largely free of the atrocities committed by other imperialist powers, it has often been positively benevolent; and that the great events of US history have been navigated largely without conflict.

### **Too Much is Left Out**

Any account based on these assumptions leaves out a lot of history. It is these absences in the USH&G exam that nourish the assumptions. A student can more easily believe them, for example, if she needs to know virtually nothing about the grim story of slavery or of brutal US conduct abroad to excel on the test. The absence of these darker aspects enables the Regents exam to outline an admiring version of the country's past, which renders events like the current colonial occupation of Iraq difficult to comprehend. The simplifications and absences also lead to an inexcusable sloppiness in accuracy, citations, and even doctoring of documents. The exam thus misleads students, and sets a poor example of scholarship.

Finally, the test fails to demand evaluative, critical thought in either the multiple choice section or the essays. If the main objective of teaching US history is to produce obedient, unquestioning, and patriotic citizens, then the exam may serve its purpose. But if the objective is to encourage critical inquiry into the past and knowledgeable engagement with contemporary issues of the nation and the world the test is clearly a failure. The June tests of 2004 and 2005 provide a number of useful examples for examining the interconnected issues of simplification, analysis, and historical interpretation.

The multiple-choice section of the exam is important because these questions lay out the important themes, events, controversies, and movements of US history as the Regents define them. More than the essay questions, which are necessarily selective, the

multiple-choice section provides teachers with a comprehensive guide to the areas for which their students must prepare. It articulates the Regents' narrative of US history. The fifty questions offer many examples of the absences and lack of rigor I am discussing. A few samples will have to suffice.

The 2005 exam asks three questions (3, 4 and 5) related to the Constitutional "mechanics-of-government," knowledge valued by the exam writers. But they invariably submerge the bitter contention over those very mechanics. The petitions of the Shays rebels exuded contempt for the wealthy leaders of the Massachusetts government and delegates from rebel strongholds voted overwhelmingly against ratification of the Constitution. Meanwhile, George Washington and John Jay, in the midst of that rebellion, fretted over the ignorance of the masses and the need for a coercive governmental power. Only an aggressive campaign by the Federalists won ratification of the new plan, but the exam writers present it as a gift of wise government bestowed on the country, rather than the imperfect product of protracted struggle.

How democratic was this Constitution? Question 4 on the 2004 test does take up the electoral college (difficult to avoid after the 2000 election), but the limits to democracy multiply as soon as one begins to look for them: the original Constitution's preservation of slavery, the 3/5 clause, and indirect election of senators; the equality of representation in the Senate, which flagrantly violates the one person-one vote principle; the appointment of Supreme Court justices by an indirectly elected president and their approval by an undemocratic Senate (which wields several other exclusive powers); the enormous influence of financial contributions and corporate interests on Congress; the enormous power of the unelected Federal Reserve Board, and so on. Isn't it important for students to understand the limits in order to decide whether they are acceptable or in need of change?

The exam treats US imperialism with bland neutrality. Question 16 on the 2004 exam asks students to recognize the Spanish American War made the US "a world power with an overseas empire," and 2005 question 23 implies legitimacy to Roosevelt and Taft's Latin American policy. But the exam has never asked students to understand what an American empire meant for those it vanquished. It has never, for example, required them to understand that the US military's long war to suppress Filipino independence came at a cost of over 200,000 dead Filipinos, concentration camp

policies that mirrored the brutal practices of the Spanish in Cuba, and widespread destruction of the countryside.

### **Consequences of Simplification**

The consequences of simplification appear in 2004 question 21, which asks students to recognize the similarities between the Populists and the Progressives. This obscures the different people who joined each and the different agendas that animated them. The emphasis on similarities between movements and leaders reaches the point of absurdity in a question that affirms that Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois both supported increased civil rights for African Americans, notwithstanding their profound disagreements over that very objective. Thus are important conflicts camouflaged by a chimerical consensus.

I have always regarded the invisibility of slavery to be a egregious absence. Slavery is central to our country's past; anyone ignorant of its career and character is ignorant of US history. Slaves shaped the nation culturally, economically, and politically, and their resistance to their own enslavement energized radical abolitionism and contributed to their own liberation. The inability to prevent the carnage of the Civil War, perhaps the US Constitution's most signal failing, was made possible by the calamitous and arguably unnecessary compromises over slavery agreed to at the constitutional convention. Slave life from the colonial era through the Civil War provides an indispensable perspective on American history. The slave trade, one of the largest forced migrations in human history, demands attention to its cruelty and heartbreak. Contemporary controversies like affirmative action or reparations cannot be intelligently engaged without this understanding.

Social history receives little attention on Regents exams. For example, aside from fighting for rights, what should students understand about the experience of American women? Among the important features are certainly their enormous responsibilities in the household economy, the centrality of pregnancy and childbirth, their exploitation in factories, and the means by which they struggled to improve their conditions. Perhaps because it does not contribute to the Regents narrative, the exam ignores social history.

The thematic essay suffers mainly from the absence of a required thesis. Students need not argue for anything; no real assessment, evaluation, or critical thought is expected. One bullet may ask for evaluation,

as in 2005, but the rating guides make it clear that the faintest glimmer of analysis should be richly rewarded. The ability to think critically is absolutely central to penetrating beneath the surface of any historical or contemporary issue. Yet the thematic essay not only asks for no thinking beyond the command of mere facts, it simplifies the task by providing suggested paragraph topics.

The document-based question presents distinct problems. It presumably asks students to analyze documents to encourage teachers to use them in their own classes; to make students familiar with the raw materials of history; to simulate the work of historians; to stimulate mastery of the historical contexts essential for assessing documents critically; and to develop the interpretive skills necessary to to inquire beneath the surface, or literal level, of documents.

The Regents version of the DBQ falls well short of these aims. The questions generally ask students to offer knowledge without requiring any assessment or analysis. The "scaffolding questions," which precede the writing of the essay and can earn students ten or more relatively effortless points, almost invariably require only a literal grasp of each document (which are, inexplicably, often secondary documents); no inferences are needed and no points are awarded for such thinking. The June 2004 question asked students to discuss social, political, and economic changes that resulted from the Civil War and Reconstruction. It might appear that the exam writers, by employing "results," have incorporated analysis into the question. Unfortunately, that possible aim was undermined by the selection of documents, which implies a confusing continuity in conditions for black people between the Civil War/Reconstruction period and the years following Reconstruction's defeat.

### **Radical Overhaul Needed**

What is to be done? Absent a radical overhaul or elimination of the exam, teachers must take it upon themselves to teach a full, critical account of US history. The study of history presents an abundance of contradictions and complexities; if presented effectively, students will find them exciting, engaging, and relevant. Adolescent skepticism welcomes alternatives to the clichés and platitudes of much of their experience with US history. Through analysis of absences and implications, the shortcomings of the Regents exam itself can become an exercise in evaluation. Of course, history teachers must love the subject themselves and make themselves lifelong

students of their discipline. It is up to us, not the exam writers in Albany, to develop the critical minds that will make the history of the next generation.