The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History John J. McNamara, Senior Education Fellow

**Examples of Thought-provoking, Evaluative “Essential Questions”: The Emergence of the United States At Home and Abroad in the 20th Century**

American Overseas Expansion and Intervention at the Turn of the 20th Century” “World War I: United States’ Involvement and Impact”” “1920s: Innovation vs Conservatism; Isolationism vs. Involvement” “The Great Depression and the New Deal of the 1930s”

**Rationale:** A carefully-crafted lesson is structured with a well-defined focus and framework as well as a clearly-stated purpose. A lesson should present students with an issue that is phrased in the form of a *problem* to be solved or a thought-provoking *question* to be analyzed and assessed by the pupils. Effective lessons do *not* merely *“cover”* content and information; they present students with opportunities to *“discover”* ideas, explanations, and plausible solutions as well as *“develop”* informed and well-reasoned viewpoints concerning thought-provoking issues and problems. Effective lessons provide students with cognitive opportunities to *process* (analyze, assess, explain, evaluate) and *transform* information into *knowledge*. Inquiry-based instruction challenges students to think critically and develop positions and viewpoints on open-ended, evaluative *“essential* *questions.”*

**“American Overseas Expansion and Intervention at the Turn of the 20th Century”**

1. ***Why did American foreign policy shift from isolationism to imperialism in the late 19th century?*** (Analyze and assess the ideas of “Manifest Destiny,” “Social Darwinism,” and the *“White Man’s Burden”* and the excerpted viewpoints from the writings of Senators Albert Beverage and Henry Cabot Lodge, Rev. Josiah Strong, Admiral Alfred Mahan, President Theodore Roosevelt, and the relationship between industrialization and expansionism.)
2. ***Was the United States justified in going to war against Spain in 1898?***(Analyze and assess the reasons why the United States went to war against Spain: humanitarianism and economic interests in Cuba, nationalism, “jingoism,” the “yellow” press, the Dupuy deLome letter, and the sinking of the *Maine.)*
3. ***To what extent did the American press cause the Spanish-American War (1898)?***(Analyze and assess the role and impact of the press, such as Joseph Pulitzer’s New York *World* and William Randolph Hearst’s New York *Journal,* in causing in the Spanish-American War of 1898.)
4. ***Should the United States have acquired and developed possessions overseas in Latin America and Asia?*** (Compare the arguments for and against the acquisition of an overseas empire by the United States)
5. ***Was the acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone an act of justifiable imperialism?***  (Analyze and assess the economic, military, and geopolitical reasons for the United States’ interest in an inter-ocean canal and its role and support of the Panamanian revolution against Columbia.)
6. ***To what extent do the economic and security needs and interests of the United States justify its intervention into the affairs of Latin American nations?*** (Analyze and assess the foreign policy statements of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt (“Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine”), William Taft (“Dollar Diplomacy”), and Woodrow Wilson (“Watchful Waiting”).)
7. ***Was the United States imperialistic in the Far East?***or ***Did the United States’ policies toward China and Japan make it a friend or foe of these nations?***  (Analyze and assess the commercial/economic, humanitarian, racial, and strategic factors in the development of United States foreign policy in the Far East, especially its “Open Door Policy” toward China.)

**World War I: United States’ Involvement and Impact**

1. ***Was world war inevitable in 1914?*** (Analyze and assess the long-term and short-term causes of World War I: intense nationalism, quest for military superiority, competitive imperialistic ambitions, entangling alliances to maintain a balance of power, and assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand: “M.A.N.I.A.” (militarism, alliances, nationalism, imperialism, and assassination.)
2. ***Was it possible for the United States to maintain neutrality in World War I*** or ***Should the United States have entered World War I?***  (Analyze and assess the factors or reasons why the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allied nations: unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany, Allied cultural, linguistic, and political kinship and propaganda, American economic interests with the Allied nations, American idealism to “make the world safe for democracy,” and hostility to Germany.)
3. ***Should the United States fight wars to “make the world safe for democracy?”***  (Analyze and assess the ideas and mission of American idealism in World War I to spread the principles of freedom and democracy throughout the world --- e.g., President Woodrow Wilson’s statements: “make the world safe for democracy,” “peace without victory,” and the “war to end all wars.”)
4. ***Should a democratic government tolerate dissent during times of war and other crises?”***  (Analyze and assess the extent to which human rights should be limited in the interest of public safety and national security during times of war and national crises. Explain and evaluate the extent of dissent and First Amendment rights during war and threats to national security and the legitimacy and significance of the “clear and present danger” doctrine in the U. S. Supreme Court decision of *Schenck v. United States* (1919) which upheld the constitutionality of the Espionage Act.
5. ***To what extent did the American home front play a pivotal role in achieving victory in World War I?*** (Analyze and assess how the successful mobilization of American resources (farms, factories, businesses, women, labor unions, and citizens’ daily sacrifices) produced sufficient military arms and food supply to achieve victory in World War I.)
6. ***To what extent did President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” provide an effective blueprint for lasting peace in Europe?*** (Analyze and assess the major provisions of President Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” as an effective plan for lasting peace in Europe.)
7. ***To what extent did the Treaty of Versailles provide a fair and effective peace settlement to World Wear I?***or ***To what extent did the Treaty of Versailles fulfill the objectives of President Wilson’s “Fourteen Points?”* (“make the world safe for democracy,” “peace without victory,” “war to end all wars”)** (*Analyze* and assess the extent to which the major provisions of the Treaty of Versailles were a reflection of President Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” and an effective plan for lasting peace in Europe.)
8. ***Should the United States have approved (. . . the Senate have ratified) the Treaty of Versailles?*** (Based on excerpts from the Treaty of Versailles, analyze and assess the reasons why the United States Senate should have approved (ratified) or rejected the Treaty of Versailles.)

**“1920s: A Decade of Innovation vs Conservatism; Isolationism vs. Involvement”**

1. ***Was American foreign policy during the 1920s primarily “isolationist” or “internationalist”*** (Analyze and assess the ways in which the United States participated in international peace and disarmament conferences and pacts (i.e., Washington “Disarmament” Conference (1921-1922) , Four-Power Treaty (1921), Nine-Power Pact (1922), Five Power Naval Treaty (1922), and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928))as well as its isolationist policies of failure to join the League of Nations, passage of immigration restriction laws and the enactment of high tariffs during the 1920s.)
2. ***To what extent were the 1920s an era of innovation and prosperity or conservatism and reaction?***  (Analyze and assess the impact of the automobile and mass consumption of new products, public transportation (subways and trolleys), new household appliances (refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, etc.), airplanes, radios, silent and “talking” movies, phonograph records, Jazz, “Swing,” and popular music, professional sports teams, and a revolution in morals and manners on life during the 1920s **vs** the resurgence of nativism (immigration restrictions and the “Red Scare,”1919-1920), religious fundamentalism (John Scopes Trial, 1925) , the Ku Klux Klan (racism), Prohibition (18th Amendment, adopted in 1919), public defiance of the law, and the rise of organized crime.)
3. ***Did women experience significant “liberation” during the 1920s?***or ***Did the role of women in American life significantly change during the 1920s?*** (Analyze and assess the impact of the 19th Amendment (woman suffrage adopted in 1920), the changing role of women in the work force (largely secretaries, typists, etc.), new styles of dress and fashion (“Flapper” look, raised hemlines, etc.), and perceived fear of the breakdown of the traditional family and values. Greater social freedom **vs** increased social tension and conflict.)
4. ***Should the United States strictly limit immigration?*** (Analyze and assess the causes and growth of anti-immigrant feeling, urban overcrowding, slums, and crime that developed during the 1920s which were highlighted in the Sacco-Vanzetti court case, trial, and execution, 1921-1927, and manifested in the establishment of a restrictive immigration quota system by the Immigration Acts of 1921 (3% of nationality in 1910), 1924 (2% of nationality in 1890), and 1927 (limited annual immigration to 150,000, mostly from northern and western European countries), and the National Origins Act of 1929 (limited annual immigration to 150,000 with quotas based on nationality in 1920 and prohibited immigration from Asian countries).)
5. ***Why did many African Americans migrate to northern and mid-western cities during the 1920s?***  (Analyze and assess the circumstances and reasons why many African Americans moved from the South and established African American communities in many northern (New York City, Philadelphia, Boston) and mid-western (Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis) cities during the 1920s. Compare the *de jure,* institutionalized racism of the “Jim Crow” segregationist South to the *de facto* racism of cities in the North and Mid-west, regarding housing, employment, and schools. Several race riots erupted in northern and mid-western cities during the 1920s.)
6. ***Why did an artistic and literary renaissance occur in Harlem during the 1920s?***  (Analyze and assess the causes and reasons why enclaves of talented African American actors, artists, musicians, performers, poets, and writers inhabited New York City (in the “Negro neighborhood” of Harlem) to create and celebrate a re-awakening and flourishing of black culture, heritage, identity, and pride during the 1920s. Their numerous artistic and literary works are collectively known as the “Harlem Renaissance” or the “New Negro Movement.” Selected readings could include excerpts from: James Weldon Johnson, *Harlem: The Culture Capital,* Alain Locke, *Enter the New Negro,* and W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk.*)
7. ***To what extent were the aspirations and identity of African Americans defined, developed, and displayed by the Harlem Renaissance?*** (Examine, explain (interpret), and evaluate a series of paintings by prominent African American artists of the “Harlem Renaissance,” as a reflection of African American aspirations, challenges, identity, and cultural values. Sample artists and their works could include: Walter Ellison (“Train Station”), William H. Johnson (“Going to Church”), Jacob Lawrence (“The Library”), Romare Bearden (“Empress of the Blues”), Allan Rohan Crite (“School’s Out”), and Palmer Hayden (“The Janitor Who Paints”). Sample poets could include: Langston Hughes (“Let America Be America Again,” “Go Slow,” and “I, Too”) and Claude McKay (“Enslaved,” “The White House,” and “The Negro’s Friend”). Sample authors could include: Charles S. Johnson (“Negro Renaissance and Its Significance”) and Langston Hughes (“When the Negro Was in Vogue”).)

**“The Great Depression and the New Deal of the 1930s”**

1. ***Was the Great Depression inevitable?*** (Analyze and assess the long-term and immediate causes of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which were exacerbated by the *underlying* *weaknesses of the American economy* (overexpansion and underconsumption of production, uneven distribution of wealth, unprecedented installment buying and rising consumer debt, widespread stock speculation “on margin,” and unsound “easy credit” bank loans) , the *policies of the federal government* (high protective tariffs restricted international trade and the failure to effectively regulate the nation’s banking practices and stock markets), and *problems in the international economy* (large economic indebtedness and widespread social dislocation in Europe, caused by World War I), and ultimately triggered by the stock market collapse in October, 1929.)
2. ***How effectively did President Herbert Hoover deal with the problems of the Great Depression?***(Analyze and assess the philosophy and policies of President Herbert Hoover to combat economic and social problems of the Great Depression, including his lifelong commitment to the principles of free enterprise and “rugged individualism,” and his support for higher tariffs (Hawley-Smoot Tariff, 1930) and the establishment of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC).)
3. ***To what extent were the New Deal’s relief programs an effective response to the Great Depression?*** (Analyze and assess the philosophy and the effectiveness of the financial and work relief programs of President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” in addressing the needs of the poor and unemployed during the Great Depression: Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA).)
4. ***To what extent were the New Deal’s programs to promote the recovery of agriculture, industry, and housing successful?*** (Analyze and assess President Roosevelt’s policies to “prime the pump” of the nation’s economy and promote the recovery of the nation’s agriculture, industry, and housing markets by providing incentives to limit production, promote cooperation and codes of competition, increase prices, provide mortgage loans to homeowners facing foreclosure, and rebuild people’s purchasing power: the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of 1933 and 1938 (AAA), the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), Home Owners Refinancing Act (HOLC).)
5. ***To what extent do labor unions and working people owe a debt to the New Deal?*** (Analyze and assess the impact of the following New Deal legislation on American workers and labor unions: excerpts from the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act (1935), the Social Security Act (1935), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).)
6. ***To what extent did the New Deal effectively reform and correct the weaknesses in the American economy?***(Analyze and assess how effectively the following New Deal agencies and programs reformed and corrected the weaknesses in the American economy, that is, to deter the occurrence of another severe depression in the future through the creation of several federal agencies: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), Security and Exchange Commission (SEC), National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Federal Housing Administration (FHA), etc..)
7. ***Was the New Deal constitutional?*** or ***To what extent was President Roosevelt’s use of broad executive power an appropriate response to the Great Depression?***  or ***Did President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs undermine the constitutional principles of separation of powers and checks and balances?*** (Analyze and assess why the U. S. Supreme Court declared that certain New Deal legislative programs, such as the AAA and the NRA, were unconstitutional (respectively in *Butler v. United States* (1936) and *Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States* (1935) and President Roosevelt’s ill-advised “court-packing” proposal to expand the size of the Supreme Court to fifteen justices, which was defeated in Congress in 1937.)
8. ***To what extent did the President Roosevelt’s New Deal effectively end the Great Depression and restore prosperity?*** or ***Did President Roosevelt’s New Deal save or weaken capitalism?*** (Analyze and assess the major accomplishments and criticisms of President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. *Accomplishments* of the New Deal: restored the nation’s confidence in its (federal) government, popularized the idea that national problems required actions and policies by the federal government, showed concern for the common man, accepted responsibility for broad economic and social objectives, provided temporary relief for the unemployed, stimulated agricultural and industrial recovery, introduced price-supports for agricultural products to help farmers, protected workers’ right of collective bargaining, provided safeguards for banking, housing, and investment markets, extended social security benefits to the elderly, disabled, and unemployed, and established the principle and precedent that the federal government should oversee the operation of the United States economy. *Criticisms:* increased the nation’s indebtedness with deficit-spending and unbalanced budgets, increased taxes to pay for the New Deal programs, increased federal government oversight and regulation of business and agriculture and “interfered” with the free market economy (“creeping socialism”), increased the number of federal government employees and created a large federal bureaucracy, and spent money excessively on “make-work,” “boondoggling” relief projects which failed to decisively eliminate the problem of unemployment (eight million were still unemployed in 1939). *Conclusion:* While the United States economy never fully recovered during the 1930s as a result of the New Deal programs, unemployment did improve somewhat, but not sufficiently for the return of national prosperity. The “cure” for the Great Depression was the economic and military production of industrial goods to assist Great Britain and ultimately conduct the war operations to defeat Germany and Japan in World War II. Business began to “boom” again, not because of the New Deal programs but primarily because of the approaching economic exigencies of World War II.)