

During the famous turning point scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the King cries out, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." Almost two years after Lynne Cheney's op-ed criticisms in *The Wall Street Journal*¹ and Rush Limbaugh's call "to flush the history standards down the toilet," it is painfully clear to the more than six thousand teachers, historians and parents who worked on developing and reviewing the national history standards that their work was unfairly caricatured for narrow partisan reasons. The history standards were chosen to become the symbolic Mapplethorpe metaphor for those more interested in abolishing the National Endowment for the Humanities than in the quality of history taught in our nation's schools.

Ironically, most criticisms were leveled at the suggested teaching activities rather than the actual national standards. These teaching activities or "examples of student achievement" were composed by K-12 classroom teachers in an effort to help educators consider varied ways to measure student achievement of the standards. As a participant in the World History Standards project, I can attest that the teacher-writers and reviewers knew these activities were only suggestions and that our colleagues across the country could easily come up with their own assessments. As professionals, teachers choose those teaching and learning activities that best suit the needs of their students.

We also knew that the original thirty-nine national standards (twenty-six of which involve in varying degrees the study of Asia) were voluntary. There is no federal mandate for any of the standards projects to be implemented. The standards books are not textbooks, nor do they present extended narrative essays on all the history knowledge

American students should have. They simply serve as guidelines and a resource for teachers and curriculum writers to consult, to assess their value, to draw from them what they find useful, to adapt them to their lesson plans, and to leave the rest aside.

To demonstrate how mistaken the criticism is, one need go no further than Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who is quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*,² "(*Exploring Paths to the Present*) is a travesty, a caricature of what these things should be—sort of a cheapshot, leftist point-of-view of history. Everything that is European or

pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep' to examine the record of Mongol conquests."⁵

What in these teaching activities and comments suggests that Chinggis Khan is a "nice sweet guy?"

Nor do the World History Standards neglect the West. The distinguished University of Chicago Professor Emeritus of History William McNeill stated in *The Wall Street Journal*: "The accusation that the World History Standards exhibit an 'anti-Western tone' is wrong. Had you looked through the volume you ridicule, you would find that classical Greece and Rome, the rise of

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American, or that has to do with white people is evil and oppressive, while Genghis Khan is a nice sweet guy just bringing his culture to other places." The facts prove otherwise. To be specific, here are some examples of comments and teaching activities appearing in *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present*.

"Describe the destructive Mongol conquests of 1206—1279 and assess their effects on peoples of China, Southeast Asia, Russia, and Southwest Asia."³

"The Mongol warlords intruded in one way or another on the lives of almost all peoples of Eurasia. The conquests were terrifying, but the stabilizing of Mongol rule led to a century of fertile commercial and cultural interchange across the continent."⁴

"Use the reported remarks of Chinggis Khan—'Man's highest joy is in victory: to conquer one's enemies, to

Christianity and the European Middle Ages are carefully presented in the context of Eurasian and world history."⁶

In an active response to save the history standards, the Council for Basic Education (CBE) convened in June 1995. Two independent review panels examined both the World History and the U.S. History Standards released by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles. Their final report, *History in the Making: An Independent Review of the Voluntary National History Standards*, provided the following findings: (1) The world history standards, without the teaching examples, make a significant contribution toward strengthening students' knowledge of world history; (2) The organizing themes of world history standards are in accordance with the principles of historical scholarship and are pedagogically sound, but have limitations that need to be addressed, particularly in the areas

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dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; (3) The use of the five spheres—social, political, scientific/technological, economic, and cultural—broadens the study of world history, but treatment of them is inconsistent and sometimes shallow; (4) The world history standards do not consistently ask students to construct meaning across broader sweeps of time or to compare regions.⁷

WORLD HISTORY STANDARDS SHOULD BE

“GLOBE-ENCIRCLING” IN SCOPE

Based upon these findings, the Voluntary National History Standards were revised in early 1996. The new edition, entitled *National Standards for History*, includes revisions that are “responsive to the recommendations of two panels of distinguished educators and public figures that were organized by the Council for Basic Education”⁸ by deleting the teaching activities and increasing the number of world history standards from thirty-nine to forty-five. However, a separate book of suggested teaching activities will soon be published by the National Center for History in the Schools. The response to the new standards has been quite favorable. Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote in *The Wall*

Street Journal: “If the revised standards aren’t adopted the consequences may be grave. Our children know too little about our history (or any other).”⁹

Yet, the basic foundations for the development of the World History Standards remain. The standards are not primarily organized around the study of cultures as such, whether Western or otherwise. Rather, they encourage critical inquiry into the question of how the world came to be the way it is. When the National Council on History Standards began its work three years ago, it declared that world history standards should be just that—globe-encircling in scope. In accord with that commitment, the standards recommended study, not of every culture and dynasty of the past, but the major civilized traditions around the world as well as those large-scale developments that cut across cultural and social boundaries and that have hemispheric or global significance. Furthermore, situating European history within its global context does not diminish Western history. On the contrary, my own classroom teaching informs me that students gain a far better understanding of the relationship of European to world development when the framework for their studies is the human community as a whole.

While hardly perfect, in short, the

National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present and the new basic edition National Standards for History provide rich resources for teachers who want to include more teaching about Asia in their social studies classrooms. Some of the major features to be found in the standards books include:

▫ A wealth of references to primary documents that will encourage students to read and hear authentic voices from the past.

▫ A new framework for critical thinking and active learning that recommends five categories of skill: (1) chronological thinking; (2) historical comprehension; (3) historical analysis and interpretation; (4) historical research capabilities; and (5) historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

This framework makes a clarion call for active learning and discourages teaching that relies on rote memorization of information divorced from contexts of historical meaning.

▫ Hundreds of ideas for incorporating literature, art, architecture, music, and other humanistic disciplines into the history curriculum, thereby introducing students to the humane substance of past ages, peoples, and cultural perspectives.

The most important outcome of

creating these resources was the partnership between precollegiate teachers and college professors who for the past decade had been including the teaching of Asia and the rest of the “non-West” in their world history courses. Working with such historians and teachers as Ross Dunn, Akira Iriye, Carol Gluck, Ben Ellman, Gary Nash, Ted Rabb and Geoffrey Symcox, the standards writing process created a specialist-teacher collaborative engaged in clarifying the importance of teaching world history.

The product of our collaborative work, the World History Standards, demonstrates that students are likely to gain a far better understanding of the importance of Asia through a critical inquiry into the movements, trends, conflicts, transformations, and cultural flowerings of greatest importance and the most enduring significance. The standards offer a number of primary organizing ideas for eight chronological eras of world history. For example, some of the standards related to Asia ask students to be able to:

UNDERSTAND major developments in East Asia and Southeast Asia in the era of the Tang dynasty (600–900 C.E.). Students should be able to assess explanations for the spread and power of Buddhism in Tang China, Korea, and Japan, and to evaluate creative achievements in painting and poetry in relation to the values of Tang society.

UNDERSTAND the rise of the Mongol empire and its consequences for Eurasian peoples, 1200–1350. For example, students should be able to assess the career of Chinggis Khan as a conqueror and military innovator in the context of Mongol society. They should also assess the usefulness and limitations of the concept of the “Pax Mongolica” and analyze how long-distance communications and trade led to cultural and technological diffusion across Eurasia.

UNDERSTAND transformations in Asian societies in the era of European

expansion (1450–1770). For example, students should be able to analyze Japan’s relations with Europeans between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and the consequences of the policy of limiting contacts with foreigners. Students should assess the extent of European commercial penetration of China and the ability of the Chinese government to control European trade. Students should also assess the impact of British and French commercial and military initiatives on politics, economy, and society in India.

UNDERSTAND how post-World War II reconstruction occurred, new international power relations took shape, and colonial empires broke up. Students should be able to assess the impact of Indian nationalism on other movements in Africa and Asia, and analyze how the subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan. Students should also be able to analyze causes and consequences of continuing urban protest and reformist economic policies in post-Mao China in the context of state authoritarianism.

These four examples cannot fully demonstrate the breadth and scope of the Standards and the National Center for History’s efforts to include the study of Asia in world history courses. Yet, in these and countless other ways, the World History Standards affirm that high school graduates who are going to live their lives in an intricately interconnected world and pursue careers and vocations in a rapidly changing global marketplace with far reaching foreign policy challenges require a fundamental understanding of the forces that have, over the long span of time, shaped our contemporary world.

While I am saddened by the initial misreading of the national standards and those who played chorus to the confusion, I am heartened by the teachers who have read the Standards and participated in discussions at national and regional conferences. The teachers

I have met at varied conferences and meetings know that labeling the Standards as politically correct and anti-Western are nonsense. The Standards are historically correct, not politically correct, and they guide teachers in periodizing world history, in identifying unifying themes and major developments in each era, and in providing strategies that invite continuous argument and engagement.

There are many ways to teach world history. The non-Western parts of the globe are described in the Standards not just in terms of their response to the challenges of the West, but in terms of their own developments and their own achievements. And yes, there are some people who do not share that view. In a democracy there will be disagreement about balance, scope and emphasis. My trust rests in the fact that history and good teachers will get it right.

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NOTES

1. Lynne Cheney, “The End of History,” *The Wall Street Journal* (October 20, 1994): A22.
2. Albert Shanker, syndicated column in *The Wall Street Journal* (November 11, 1994): A14.
3. *National Center for History in the Schools. Exploring Paths to the Present. National Standards for World History* (Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, 1994): 146.
4. *Ibid.*, 128.
5. *Ibid.*, 147.
6. William McNeill, “Letters to the Editor,” *The Wall Street Journal* (January 11, 1995): A15.
7. Council for Basic Education, *History in the Making: An Independent Review of the Voluntary National History Standards* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1996): 25-29.
8. Gary B. Nash and Charlotte Crabtree, preface to *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles: UCLA 1996): ix.
9. Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Wall Street Journal* (April 3, 1996): A14.