

LETTERS/COMMENTARY

Education Reform Rewrites World History

The effort to define national standards in core academic subjects is one of the most important education reforms the United States has undertaken. Standards are crucial in making sure that all children have access to a solid curriculum, but the effort to create good standards is not without its perils.

No subject is likely to be as controversial as history.

Unfortunately, the world history standards developed by the National History Standards Project don't measure up.

To begin with, they are not really standards at all. In an obvious effort to please everyone and offend no one, these world history standards cover too much and offer no guidance about the relative importance of the various topics.

It's inconceivable that all students

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could—or should—learn all of this material. Teachers will be forced to pick and choose, and once that happens, we have no more standards.

We'll simply have each teacher's version of the standards, which is pretty much where we are right now.

While it is critical that our students graduate from high school with substantial knowledge and understanding of other civilizations, they do not, in an already crowded curriculum, acquire detailed knowledge of every major civilization before the year 1000, as these standards require.

Second, if this document embodies a standard, it's a double standard. For example, the idea of foreign "dominance" is first

used to describe European activity in the Americas, and Europeans are characterized as invaders and intruders.

However, non-Western incursions are treated more neutrally, as in "analyze Inca expansion" or "explain the success of the Turkic warrior class in uniting the diverse peoples of the Indian subcontinent."

Third, despite the encyclopedic nature of these standards, students will still be left ignorant of fundamental aspects of contemporary world history.

Students won't understand how the United States viewed or handled the Cold War—"containment" is not even mentioned.

They won't understand why the Soviet Union collapsed, because they will have learned nothing about the dissident and democracy movements in Eastern Europe

and the Soviet Union and nothing about the Soviet government between the 1950s and 1980s.

World history standards should include substantial coverage of the influential cultures and civilizations that have previously been neglected.

But they should not have a bias against Western civilization. If we are going to teach students to be critical historical thinkers, we must encourage them to apply their critical faculties to all cultures, not just their own.

This document needs a complete overhaul before it can honestly lay claim to representing high standards in the study of world history.

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