

H-Diplo | ISSF

Forum 36 (2022) on the Scholarship of Walter LaFeber

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Lloyd Gardner | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Published on 14 October 2022

<https://issforum.org/to/Forum36>

Contents

INTRODUCTION BY LLOYD GARDNER, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY	2
ESSAY BY FRANK COSTIGLIOLA, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT	9
ESSAY BY ANNE L. FOSTER, INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY	12
ESSAY BY GREG GRANDIN, YALE UNIVERSITY	16
ESSAY BY JUSTIN HART, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY	24
ESSAY BY ANDREW ROTTER, COLGATE UNIVERSITY	37

INTRODUCTION BY LLOYD GARDNER, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

“Walt”

Let me begin by talking about a picnic in one of Madison’s beautiful parks near a lake in midsummer 1957. It was ideal weather and the three of us (Walt LaFeber, Tom McCormick, and myself) were talking with our wives about our graduate school experience, the profession, and the unknown future. I was surprised when Walt mused that maybe he would not seek an academic position after all the past course work, and once the dissertation writing yet to come had been accomplished, but would instead find a better way to reach a broad audience by using his training to write political novels.

At the moment, he went on, Edwin O’Connor’s best-selling novel, *The Last Hurrah* about the famous Boston mayor, James Curley, told people more about politics than most historians had.¹ We could tell he was serious – if not about abandoning academia, then about the teaching and writing of history in modern America. We understood he was not raising the issue in any flippant or momentary distraction. Instead, I have always thought this anecdote neatly sums up what our panel is saying about Walter LaFeber’s lifelong driving passion: the desire to communicate.

Walt never wrote a novel, but his books reached a big audience, and as Frank Costigliola points out below, his undergraduate classes were filled, not only with Cornell students, but often with guests they brought along on a Saturday morning to hear one of his lectures, including relatives as well as classmates and friends who were not enrolled in class. It was a bold move to teach a lecture course on Saturday morning. But he saw it as a challenge – to himself, but also to Cornell students. And he relished both challenges. His lectures, like those of Wisconsin professors Fred Harvey Harrington and William Appleman Williams, were delivered without formal notes.

Walt once told me about the crucial advice his undergraduate mentor at Hanover College in Indiana had given him: he should first go to Stanford University to learn to write with Thomas A. Bailey – author of *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, far and away the most popular textbook of the postwar era of the 1940s and 1950s.² He was always glad that he followed this advice. Bailey gave him the secret, Walt said, about how he did it. Each page had to have a picture or a cartoon or an indented quotation, so that the reader would turn the page, not feel intimidated by a full page of text and continue on to the next, and then the next, until the chapter ended.

Having learned this lesson, his Hanover professor continued, Walt should then apply to the University of Wisconsin to learn some history. At the time, UW was steadfastly “Beardian” on the American side, and a holdout in the academy against the onrush of Cold War “Consensus History” which swept across the country for a time and influenced the re-telling of the American story to minimize conflict and celebrate the fundamental agreement about basics. (In fact, of course, the Wisconsin History Department believed thoroughly in consensus history – defined as an agreement among elite policymakers about the purposes of American power.)

¹ Edwin O’Connor, *The Last Hurrah* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1956).

² Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: F.S. Crofta & Co., 1940).

The American History contingent at Wisconsin was still packed with remnants of the Beardian tradition, an amalgam of Charles A. Beard's writings on the economic basis of politics and of an earlier historian before him whose explanation of America's successful navigation through the Industrial Revolution onto the course world affairs centered on the supposed revitalizing of democracy by the frontier experience that ultimately led the nation into the Pacific after the Great Depression of the 1890s.

This theme is forever associated, of course, with Frederick Jackson Turner who taught at Wisconsin in the 1890s, and whose seminal paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," was delivered at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, Illinois. Turner left for Harvard, but his impact on generations of Wisconsin graduate students – as well as intellectuals, and even national political leaders, for example, Woodrow Wilson and (through Walter Prescott Webb at the University of Texas), Lyndon Johnson -- was immense. All incoming graduate students were almost immediately made aware of the "Turner Thesis," and employed it in various ways as an analytical tool to explain how American political development depended on both the reality – and, especially, the mental image of that evolution. Put another way, the frontier was the supposed scene of the renewal of original principles, or, yet another way, a series of horizontal revolutions that made a vertical revolution unnecessary. It seemed particularly apt as an underpinning of American expansion at the end of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the title of Walter LaFeber's 1963 prize-winning first book, *The New Empire, An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* proceeds from some of those premises, with its inherent *double entendre*.³ A new empire more than pre-suggests that the Western expansion of the nation to the Pacific coastline or *frontier* was in fact a "first" American Empire, and that expansion into the Pacific and Caribbean was the necessary new empire. But also that this *new* American empire was different from other empires. It did not depend on territorial additions in the way that the European powers divided Africa.

The Wisconsin History Department was referred to by Walt once in reviewing those times as a "Murderers' Row" of heavy hitters, as the New York Yankees of that era were often called: Merle Curti, Howard K Beale, William B. Hesseltine, Merrill Jensen, and Fred Harvey Harrington. It was in the give and take of Harrington's American foreign policy seminar that many first books were previewed. It is well to keep in mind, therefore, that the "Wisconsin School" predated the arrival of William Appleman Williams.

And thus Harrington's "selection" of Williams to take over his role in the History Department as he went into administration can best be explained with that set of traditions in mind. Of the three of us, Walt, Thomas McCormick, and myself, only Walt knew about Williams' first book, *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947*.⁴ He knew it had already created quite a stir with its early critique of the "Containment Thesis" foundation of American postwar policies put forward, of course, by George Frost Kennan in the famous "Mr. X" article in 1947, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which appeared in the July, 1947 issue of the journal, *Foreign Affairs*.

All three of us became Williams's TAs in 1957-1958. Bill's lecture method was to outline three or four main topics for the day and then go into the components of each, suggesting that there were, say, three sub-topics to consider for each main point. He seldom got through the main headings as his mind worked out the

³ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

⁴ William Appleman Williams, *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947* (New York: The Rinehart Company, 1952).

implications in front of the class – leaving the students to rush back to us at the end of class to ask what “Point Four” was. We had no idea, of course.

As a result, after the first few weeks we three felt a dire need to explore the Williams “approach” to American foreign policy outside the classroom. So we decided to invite Bill and his wife to dinner at the apartment of Walt and his wife. At the end of the evening we understood the need to explore different themes to get at what Professor Williams called the *Weltanschauung* or worldview of American policymakers, their definitions of the challenges to the nation and of the policies they derived from the circumstances to deal with those challenges. Williams was a critic of those policies, but never doubted the sense of responsibility that the principal actors felt in the 1890s, for example, for the national welfare in making the choices they did. Williams taught us all the importance of “multi-archival” research at home, as well as in foreign archives to get beyond the what-one-diplomat-said-to-another explanations of policy.

There was little doubt, to take one example, that Bill’s expressed sympathies with President Herbert Hoover’s dilemmas in the Great Depression were much more “radical” in the original sense of that word than a defense of Republican inaction that led to Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal.” At that juncture, he would argue, Hoover was not concerned about profits for the few, but the dangers of “isms” capturing an American political party.

Justin Hart captures how that night in the apartment on State Street influenced LaFeber to write those lines that he quotes in his essay for this forum about the *New Empire*: “Let me begin with my reaction to reading *The New Empire*. I still remember cracking open my copy of the book and almost immediately doing a double-take when I got to this line, on the third page of the preface: ‘I must add that I have been profoundly impressed with the statesmen of these decades.’”

Anne Foster has written a bravura overview of LaFeber's works and how they developed the various threads of culture and race into the woven framework of informal empire fashioned to serve the needs of American capitalism from the late nineteenth century on into the present era. She also notes his delight in exploring the dynamic tensions within policymakers going back even to John Quincy Adams, and the hints of skepticism about what they were doing as they made the world safe for American democracy and capitalism. She also demonstrates how other scholars have enlarged upon his themes. Her essay is a perfect introduction to LaFeber's continuing influence on the history of American foreign relations, noting also his influential general textbook, *The American Age*.⁵

Frank Costigliola provides us with an introductory framework for Walt’s career at Cornell and the intense feelings he had not only about history, but his loyalties to the University as well. His relationship with both graduate and undergraduate students was little short of amazing. Costigliola refers to it as a form of “charisma.” One could also see this in action – at times, for he was not a convention “regular” – when all he had to do was appear. His focus was always on the person he was talking to, not someone across the room as is so often the case at academic gatherings.

⁵ Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

One time, when, as Frank points out, he momentarily thought about leaving Cornell in the wake of the 1968 student occupations of university buildings, he interviewed for a position at what was then the Princeton Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He stopped by to tell us about it on the way home to Ithaca. I have never been able to decide from what he said whether he deliberately chose a nineteenth-century topic for his lecture to that faculty simply because he thought he knew they wanted something “pertinent” to contemporary foreign policy and was not serious about leaving Cornell, and therefore deliberately talked history instead of political science, or because he wanted to use the opportunity as a teaching moment about the “misuses” of the past – a favorite subject of Warren Susman, whose influence Greg Grandin points to in his essay.

Susman taught American Intellectual History at Rutgers and exhibited some of the same charisma with students as did LaFeber. But Grandin’s point is really about the openness of the “Wisconsin” school to the cultural turn in studies of American foreign policy. Andrew Rotter, an undergraduate at Cornell, got to know Walt well after he returned to upstate New York to teach at Colgate. He did not know whether his former mentor would regard his new work as somehow a betrayal of “revisionism” and the Wisconsin “school.” He was somewhat surprised, he writes, that was not the case. Indeed, as changes came to the profession it might be said that the Society of Historians of American Foreign Policy, in part because of students versed in that new approach, evolved at a somewhat faster pace than other larger academic organizations.

However that may be (or not be), Rotter mentions how many, who, like him, turned to examining the impact of cultural issues and their impact on policymakers were at first regarded as outlanders who had failed to carry on under the revisionist banner. But as his experiences with Frank Costigliola’s work and LaFeber’s interest in it demonstrated, Walt was eager to discuss such questions as arose in their work, even those whose interpretations differed from his own. He urged others to read Kristin Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood*, in a blurb Rotter cites even though it seemed to repudiate much of his argumentation in *The New Empire*. “Kristin Hoganson’s important book is a pioneering, imaginative, and provocative analysis” of the reasons the United States had gone to war in 1898. It “cannot be ignored—in part because of a spirited debate over its innovative approach.” Rotter also hits on another important point: “Although he took very few graduate students, he was committed to helping diversify the ranks of academia.”

Greg Grandin takes a broad road to demonstrate how Walt’s *America, Russia, and the Cold War* that first appeared in 1967 and went through eleven additions until 2002 changed the writing of “Cold War” history. Instead of a political or economic leader, the first person he calls upon to explain the Cold War was the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, “to tease out the sprouts of Cold War fancy. ‘Not since Jonathan Edwards’ day of the 1740’s,’ Walt wrote, ‘had an American theologian so affected his society and, like Edwards, Niebuhr emphasize the role of sin and sinful power in that society.’”

In Rotter’s turn to cultural determinants, Walt might say, there was Niebuhr waiting for him. But what *America, Russia, and the Cold War* was arguing as the title itself suggested was that the Cold War was not simply a Russian-American military-political conflict that threatened to go nuclear at times, but an ideological struggle played out in many areas of the world, reflecting different local conditions.

But the United States had developed an ideological position that justified military intervention in all these conflicts. The key player in this development was Niebuhr. His pronouncements helped to unify policy thinking by justifying military actions in the many different aspects of that struggle as a measured method of opposing atomic warriors at home like the General Jack De Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*, while demonstrating

that Cold War(s) could be waged and won. And they did so in demonstrating finally that there was an American ideology, and that the supposed division between “idealists” and “realists” did not exist. “LaFeber quoted his intellectual comrade, Susman, to note the ‘singularly anti-historical spirit’ that befell the nation’s political class at WWII’s end. This was worrying, LaFeber believed, for, still quoting Susman, ‘it was precisely because in our kind of social order history becomes a key to ideology, a key to the world view that shapes programs and actions in the present and the future.’”

Grandin sees LaFeber thus providing the foundations, instead, for an explanation of what would become the Forever Wars everywhere. “Endless war abroad has its match at home in an endless culture war. The Right learned that picking fights over “politically correct” or “morally equivalent” history was one good way to camouflage their war against a more equal and democratic society as a populist clash against elites.”

Justin Hart scans the entire corpus of LaFeber’s work with a somewhat different conclusion. He sees him as an actual “realist,” while uncomfortable to the nth degree with the racist behavior of American policymakers toward Central America, and especially evident in the Vietnam War. Like Grandin he notes the particular influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, but sees the two engaged in a sort of intellectual wrestling match that continued for years – as both evolve in their views of the world.

“In hindsight,” Hart writes, “it really was remarkable that an analysis of the Cold War so indebted to the thinking of someone like Reinhold Niebuhr came across as ‘radical’ in its own time. But, as LaFeber himself said of former Vice President Henry Wallace, who was ex-communicated from the Democratic Party in 1946 for asking uncomfortable questions about the assumptions driving US Cold War policy, the fact ‘that Americans, then and later, pictured Wallace as a radical indicates the confusion engendered by Cold War tensions’.”

In Hart’s view, Niebuhr’s opposition to the Vietnam War suggested to LaFeber that Cold War thinking could be “contained,” as it were to Europe and Japan, where George Kennan had originally described the nature of the post-World War II struggle for military position and political influence.

But the rest of the world? “If there is a case to be made for LaFeber as a radical critic of US foreign relations it is probably to be found in his two mid-career books on Latin America, *The Panama Canal* (1978) and *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983).” Here, Hart concludes, “LaFeber offered an analysis consistent with Immanuel Wallerstein-style world-systems theory. In short, he argued that the United States had consistently supported oligarchs and their representatives on the ground in these countries, over and against the interests of ordinary people, because the oligarchs maintained—often through egregious brutality—the sort of political stability that allowed U.S. economic and geopolitical interests to thrive.”

Perhaps the differences among our panelists document the argument about the ongoing (and inevitable) search for a “Usable Past,” not only by policymakers but just as certainly by historians. We all call upon “history” as a witness in making our case for understanding options for the future. Walter LaFeber’s books, articles, lectures, all demonstrate a commitment to that quest.

Once many years ago, my wife Nancy and I were in Ithaca on one of our regular visits. Walt and I visited a wine store to purchase the evening’s “libation.” As I perused the shelves for a suitable vintage, Walt stood talking to the owner beside a display of fine Madeira’s. He bought one and we drove back to his house. After dinner he opened the Madeira, filled our glasses, and said with a smile that the original cask had been started

in 1814, when John Quincy Adams was in Ghent, Belgium, one of the American peace negotiators for a treaty to end the “War of 1812.”

It’s a fitting note to describe Walter LaFeber’s commitment to the “permanence” of history as beyond division between past and present. From the essays below I have learned new things about his impact on the writing of American history – not just what has always been called diplomatic history, because that is a narrow definition of what he and, yes, one should say, Thomas McCormick as well, sought to accomplish.

Participants:

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe for Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Approaching Vietnam* (W.W. Norton, 1988), *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995), and *The War on Leakers* (The New Press, 2016). He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Affairs

Frank Costigliola is Board of Trustees Professor of History at the University of Connecticut. His latest book is *George F. Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton, 2023).

Anne L. Foster is Associate Professor of History at Indiana State University, and serves as co-editor of *Diplomatic History*. Her first book was *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Duke University Press, 2010). She also co-edited, and published an essay in *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Duke University Press, 2003). Her current research explores the history of opium regulation and control in Southeast Asia. She has published numerous articles and chapters on this topic, including “Medicine to Drug: Opium’s Transimperial Journey,” in Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, editors, *Crossing Empires: Taking US History into Transimperial Terrain* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Greg Grandin is the Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor of History at Yale University. He is the author of Pulitzer Prize-winning *The End of the Myth* (Metropolitan, New York: 2019), *Kissinger’s Shadow* (Metropolitan Books, New York, 2015); *The Empire of Necessity* (Metropolitan Books, New York 2014), which won the Bancroft and Beveridge prizes, *Fordlandia* (Metropolitan Books, New York: 2009); *Empire’s Workshop* (Metropolitan Books, New York, 2006, revised edition 2020); *The Last Colonial Massacre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and *The Blood of Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), winner of the Bryce Wood Award.

Justin Hart is President’s Excellence in Teaching Professor and Associate Professor of History at Texas Tech University, where he is also Senior Fellow with the Institute for Peace and Conflict. He is the author of *Empire of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and several articles and book chapters on US public diplomacy and the cultural dimensions of US foreign relations. He completed his Ph.D. in History at Rutgers University. His current project is a history of the failed campaign for Universal Military Training in the United States.

Andrew Rotter is Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of History at Colgate University. He is author most recently of *Empires of the Senses: Bodily Encounters in Imperial India and the Philippines* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and he is writing, for Oxford, a primer on the cultural turn in U.S. foreign relations history.

ESSAY BY FRANK COSTIGLIOLA, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

“What Was It about Walt LaFeber That Made People Like Him?”

I first met Walt LaFeber on March 15, 1968.¹ I was sitting in the hallway of Sibley Hall, then home to both the History and Government Departments at Cornell. I was there to talk with Professor LaFeber, hoping to be admitted to graduate school the following fall. I had never met LaFeber and I had, in those pre-internet days, only a vague idea what he looked like. Down the hall ambled a tall, thin, serious-looking professor, and I nervously asked him, “Are you Professor LaFeber?” “No, I’m not,” came the curt reply, “but I wish I were.” This, I later learned, was Government Professor Andrew Hacker, already famous as an acerbic curmudgeon. Almost everyone – with a few exceptions that I’ll mention in a moment – almost everyone who knew Walt personally, had listened to him speak, or had read his work admired and respected him.

People also *liked* Walt LaFeber. LaFeber radiated charm, even charisma. People noticed when he walked into a room – even if the room was *not* Bailey Hall at Cornell, 11 am on a Saturday morning, with the huge lecture auditorium packed with students taking his famous lecture course and bringing along with them visiting dates or parents, all of them waiting to hear the latest installment of the ironic misadventures in America’s foreign relations history.

Charisma is difficult to parse. Certainly in LaFeber’s case, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. While we can point to this or that characteristic, what, precisely, made Walt so appealing to so many people in such different circumstances is hard to pin down. I posit three three reasons why Walt made such a positive impression on people, and, coincidentally, they all begin with the letter “P”: the Power of his intellect, his People skills, and – not least – his Principles.

Walt LaFeber was so damn smart. Time and again, he approached a complex issue, broke it down into its constituent parts, and then offered a cogent, beautifully expressed, and often ironic explanation of what was what. That’s what he did in his lectures and in his books. Although the lectures were famously delivered without notes and seemingly without effort, enormous preparation went into each one. I once ill-advisedly knocked on his office door shortly before class time, and when he gruffly said come in, I saw arrayed on his desk a myriad of note cards that he was committing to memory. What was so striking about his prize-winning books was the range of topics, which crossed historical eras and encompassed virtually every part of the globe.²

One reason LaFeber was so passionate about the importance of history was that he regarded it as essential to understanding and dealing with the present. His lectures and books expressed that conviction. Whether it was the Cold War with Russia, the war in Vietnam, the issue of the Panama Canal, repression and revolution in Central America, the rivalry with Japan, or even the impact of globalized multinational corporations, LaFeber’s incisive book about the history of that particular problem illuminated the contemporary issue. He wrote serious

¹ I wish to thank Eric Edelman and Stephen Arbogast for their suggestions.

² For example, Walter LaFeber *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967) which went through ten editions from 1967 to 2006, or *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), which was published in 1963 and reissued in 1998.

history that was accessible to a wide variety of people. He ranked as a gifted storyteller. He enlivened historical narrative with wit, irony, and an appreciation of tragedy. LaFeber had wisdom with regard to both personal and political relations. I often ask myself, what would Walt do or say about this? In reading his books, listening to his lectures, or engaging him in conversation, most people found themselves admiring, respecting and liking the person who laid it all out so with such fairness, wit, and insight.

Not everyone, however, appreciated LaFeber's razor-sharp intelligence. One example: in February 1968, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the home of such intellectual giants as Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein, hosted a seminar on "Cold War revisionism." The apparent purpose of the gathering was to quash this supposedly dangerous heresy. The assigned topic of discussion was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, which mocked the revisionists and blamed the Cold War solely on the Soviets, especially Joseph Stalin.³ Stalin's paranoia had rendered postwar cooperation impossible, Schlesinger insisted. Schlesinger was there at the seminar, as was George F. Kennan, many of the Institute faculty, and some of the heavyweights from the Princeton University History Department. To this august gathering were invited two young revisionist historians, Walter LaFeber and Lloyd Gardner. Gardner later recalled that he had felt that he and Walt were on trial. In a calm, assured voice, Walt reviewed the underlying premises in Schlesinger's essay, affirmed that he agreed with most of them, and then proceeded to expose the contradictions and illogic of Schlesinger's judgments. Walt shredded the argument advanced by Schlesinger and held to by most of the people in the room, including Kennan. LaFeber and Gardner ended up escaping the ambush and turning the tables. Schlesinger could only sputter a lame reply. Kennan, who had turned his seminar chair sideways so that he did not have to look at LaFeber and Gardner, was also rendered, unusually for him, ineffective. Although Schlesinger and Kennan on that occasion did not appreciate LaFeber's intellect, nearly everyone else did.

Almost everyone who came into contact with Walt also appreciated the second leg of the triad, LaFeber's People skills. Undergraduates daring to go up after lecture to talk to the great man were startled – and totally won over – by his openness, friendliness, and genuine interest in their individual lives. He went beyond the superficial meet-and-greet to engage students deeply. He welcomed disagreement as long as interlocutors were rigorous in their thinking. He was never patronizing. Walt not only studied diplomatic history, he also practiced diplomacy. He knew how to approach a wide variety of people – from my Italian immigrant father with the thick accent and the meager education, to groups of adoring alumni, to gruff heads of corporations adept at fending off appeals for money. It was not for nothing that Cornell sent LaFeber out on the road to woo potential donors. It helped that he appreciated quality cuisine and wine, relished talking sports, and "bled red" in terms of his love for Cornell. He only briefly referred to such encounters when talking with me, but I suspect he helped raise hundreds of millions of dollars for the university. Walt's devotion to Cornell was symbolized by the fact that for his entire forty-seven years on the faculty, and even after his retirement – he and his wife, Sandy, lived a short walking distance from the campus. He spent long hours in his faculty carrel in Olin Library, number 510, which had books and papers piled precariously high.

Despite this deep devotion to Cornell, Walt LaFeber came close to resigning from the university on a matter of Principle - the third element of his appeal. While usually affable and flexible, LaFeber adhered tightly to his core principles. In the Spring of 1969, African-American students brandishing guns marched out of Willard Straight Hall after days of occupying the student union building. Hoping to buy peace, President James Perkins agreed to forgive the offense of bringing armed weapons into a campus building. LaFeber, then thirty-five year-old and the chair of the History Department, was furious at the implied armed threat to peaceful discourse in a university setting. As he later explained, "I'm a relativist in terms of object and conclusion. I don't think I'm necessarily

³ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "The Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 46, no. 1 (October 1967): 22-52.

right. What I am an absolutist about, however, is the procedure you use to get there, which means the university always has to be open, and it cannot be compromised.” He resigned as head of the Department and prepared to go elsewhere— to the University of Maryland, he told me. Things were eventually resolved: Perkins himself soon resigned, and Walt stayed put. As a matter of further principle, Walt continued teaching throughout the student strike of 1969 as well as the student strike the following year that protested Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia. Despite the pleas of chagrined students who urged him to honor these strikes, LaFeber honored instead his core principle that teaching and other conversations within the university remained sacrosanct. Learning was more important than protesting.

Other principles also engaged Walt’s passion and thought. He believed that intellectuals held a sacred responsibility to speak truth to power. Thinking through a problem, planning for contingencies, and remembering that things could screw up were all vital: that is why he so admired John Quincy Adams, respected the imperialists of 1898, remained skeptical about student radicals in the late 1960s, and despised the naive hubris of Cold War liberals. While he respected Political Science and other disciplines, he remained convinced that History was the real deal. Walt always tried to look out for the interests of students. He took teaching very seriously, and he expected his students to work hard. He acted on his strong commitment to diversity. Although he took very few graduate students, he was committed to helping diversify the ranks of academia. In the early 1970s, when there remained a paucity of scholarship on Native American history, LaFeber decided he had, somehow, to include the story of Native American dispossession as an aspect of US foreign relations history. And so he assigned Arthur Kopit’s play *Indians* to get the message across.

It bears repeating that with Walt LaFeber, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. While we can point up this or that aspect of his life and legacy, he as a totality was much more: a brilliant, wide-ranging scholar, a teacher who changed the lives of many of his students, and an irreplaceable friend to many, myself included.

ESSAY BY ANNE L. FOSTER, INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Any assessment of Walter LaFeber's scholarship has to begin with his consistent attention to the role that economics, more properly capitalism, played in shaping the course of US foreign relations. It's obvious, the bedrock of all his work. Few people ask, however, why he was so interested in the ways that capitalism motivated US interactions with the world. And fewer think to ask why, given that fundamental, focused explanation, he painted such rich portraits of US foreign relations, replete with references to novels, movies, sports, and the arts as well as including compelling biographies of the (mostly) men and (some) women who created those foreign relations. I know I never asked him, despite (too) many hours spent discussing opera and football, along with my dissertation, in his carrel in Olin Library in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I might have thought to, when he was interrogating (the word does not feel too harsh) me about what could possibly be meant by international history and how one might study it. He rarely gave straightforward answers to questions about what he thought, let alone what he felt or believed. And given that he and my dad are nearly the same age, it felt presumptuous to ask. I might ask him now, if I could, but I suspect he would direct his kind, piercing gaze at me, and tell a story to re-direct the conversation, a story intended to suggest obliquely that the answers can be found in his writings. And, as with many things, he would be right.

Here's my best guess: Despite the fact that critiques of US foreign policy permeate all his work, and despite his argument that the problems in US foreign policy are systemic, not episodic, LaFeber saw his task as explaining why. It was not his main goal to judge the past or solve the problems. A better read, more thoughtful, more historically informed policymaker might make better, if still unjust or inequitable policy. His works were designed to reach current and future policymakers as well as his academic audience, in hope that they might learn from them. His was an "eyes wide open" kind of hope, meaning often faint. He understood well that the power of capitalism is vast. Capitalism could wield power directly, as when United Fruit bribed and threatened and overwhelmed governments in the United States and Central America to expand its holdings and political power and wealth. He wrote about that version of the exercise of power eloquently in *Inevitable Revolutions*.¹ Both the US government and US companies held nearly all the economic cards in Central America starting in the late nineteenth century. They acquired those cards purposefully, and used them to their own ends. Harms fell primarily on the peoples of Central America, although more recently historians like Jason Colby and Julie Greene have explored the widening circles of harm from this exercise of what used to be called informal imperialism in their explorations of the ways US racial policies and racism, as well as US labor, served US capital in Central America.² The story as told in *Inevitable Revolutions* is stark and compelling. The lines LaFeber drew from dollar diplomacy of the early twentieth century to the United States' oppressive, anti-revolutionary policies in the 1980s helped readers,

¹ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: Norton, 1983). An expanded edition was published in 1984 and a greatly expanded edition in 1993.

² Jason Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and US Expansion in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), and Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin, 2009). Naoko Shibusawa's insightful exploration of the ways the United States has exercised imperial power contains the reminder that informal imperialism is a form of free trade imperialism. See Naoko Shibusawa, "US Empire and Racial Capitalist Modernity," *Diplomatic History* 45, 5 (November 2021), discussion of informal imperialism on 863.

many of whom were experiencing and watching and protesting US policies when the book was first published, understand how rooted they were in US history.

The thread woven through every book is the demands of capital. Demands for a wider market. Demands for access to invest in any country at any time. Demands for US government protection of American capital during upheavals in any country, even when those upheavals stemmed from the actions of American capitalists. But this thread was woven in with other threads. The thread of race was thin but constant. The thread of intellectual ability and political skill of the politicians and officials carrying out US foreign policy was brighter and thicker, part of the richness of the narrative. In his later works, LaFeber wove in threads about cultural relations, too. It's tempting, and perhaps partly right, to see the inclusion of these other threads as prompted by changes in the profession. But even in his first book, *The New Empire*, all the threads help weave the story.³

The most prominent thread, after the economic motive, is that of intellectual and political ability. *The New Empire* has an entire chapter titled "The Intellectual Foundation," exploring the writings and influence of four thinkers in the late nineteenth century: Frederick Jackson Turner, Brooks Adams, Josiah Strong and Alfred Thayer Mahan.⁴ Although historians in the intervening nearly 60 years have questioned the extent of the influence of these men, LaFeber's careful exploration demonstrates that he believed words and philosophy and values mattered. Earlier in *The New Empire*, he had referenced the types of novels that were written and popular in the late nineteenth century to demonstrate that Americans both embraced and worried about the effects of "industrial maturity."⁵ His admiration of their intellect, even if not always of their policies, helps explain LaFeber's fascination with John Quincy Adams and William Henry Seward. In his seminar during my first semester, in the fall of 1988, I brought to class a copy of LaFeber's book *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, from which we had assigned readings. He gave a start upon seeing it, and remarked something like: That is my only book that is not still in print, and the only book I wrote solely because I wanted to.⁶ One of the most compelling lectures in his highly popular History 314 course, on US foreign policy since 1914, explored the intellectual history of the origins of the Cold War, using the writings of Carl Becker and Reinhold Niebuhr. I shamelessly borrow from that lecture until now, and students are still riveted. Economic motives always mattered most, but LaFeber knew that how people learned, wrote, read, and thought about their circumstances also mattered in the ways that they formulated specific responses to specific situations.

As he began to write about the twentieth century, not surprisingly he included a wider array of intellectual influences, broadening out to what is more recognizably cultural relations, but in his work perhaps more accurately cultural influences and milieu. In *The Clash: US-Japanese Relations throughout History*, the primary clash is between "two different forms of capitalism."⁷ He also describes how this clash played out on the baseball diamond starting in the late-nineteenth century, and in the mutually unintelligible responses in Japan and the United States to Akira Kurosawa's 1991 film *Rhapsody in August*, about World War II.⁸ *Michael*

³ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963).

⁴ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 62-101.

⁵ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 15.

⁶ LaFeber, *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Speeches, Papers* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

⁷ LaFeber, *The Clash: US-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) xviii.

⁸ LaFeber, *The Clash*, 63 for baseball, 402 for Kurosawa.

Jordan and the New Global Capitalism epitomizes the way LaFeber used cultural developments to explain his economic analysis.⁹ This thread in his work, in which cultural relations provide illustrations of his broader argument about how economic motives backed all foreign relations, is not mere decoration. LaFeber used these to show that how people experienced the world was shaped by forces they sometimes did and sometimes did not perceive.

Above all else, LaFeber wanted to explain how the United States came to be the country that it is. His focus was foreign relations, but in both the way he taught and the way he wrote, he revealed that he is a scholar of the history of the nation much more broadly. His attention to race, both the fact and the manner of it, reveals this broader concern. LaFeber never wrote ‘about’ race. No book or article has as its subject the ways that race and racism shaped US foreign relations. But race is always present. It’s part of the context, as it must be in a country shaped by racial thinking and racist policies. Even in *The New Empire*, written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, LaFeber notes the ways ideas about race shaped US policy toward Haiti, Cuba, and especially Hawaii. Throughout the 1890s, as US officials discussed various potential policies regarding Hawaii, a constant theme in their deliberations was a reluctance to bring what LaFeber called the islands’ “multiracial population” under US rule. Those officials, and US planters, also worried about the status of Chinese immigrant labor. LaFeber focused more on strategy and economics in his discussion of policy toward Hawaii, but at key points noted the racial context.¹⁰ In that same book, the chapter about the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895-1896 does not appear to include any commentary about race. But LaFeber notes several times that US Secretary of State Richard Olney failed to consult with the Venezuelan government during negotiations. By raising this slight to Venezuela several times in the narrative, LaFeber suggests the omission reflected how US officials viewed the capacity of Venezuelans.¹¹

Some of LaFeber’s later works lent themselves easily to including discussion of the influence of race. Even in ones that did not, the topic appears. In the fifth edition (published 1985) of *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1984*, he makes the argument that one reason the United States failed to actively oppose South African apartheid in the 1960s was fear that it would open the door to criticism of US racial policies.¹² This argument is commonplace now, but was not yet in the mid-1980s. By the time he published *The Clash* in 1997, the influence of race and racial thinking on US foreign relations was an accepted, vibrant subfield. LaFeber continued his career-long pattern of discussing race. He discusses the effects of racist opposition to Japanese immigration on US foreign relations, especially in the early twentieth century, President Woodrow Wilson’s opposition to Japanese efforts to get a racial equality clause during the Paris Peace Conference negotiations, and the ways in which racial imaginaries shaped decisions during World War II.¹³ No one would argue that LaFeber focused on the influence of race in his work. An attentive read of his work demonstrates that he understood the continual influence of racialized thinking by US policymakers.

I still assign *The American Age* when I teach US foreign relations history.¹⁴ As I was talking with a student about it the other day, he said that he really liked the textbook. As most students do, he said he enjoyed reading it. He also remarked that he could tell that the economic motivations for US foreign relations were

⁹ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁰ LaFeber, *New Empire*, 136-49, 203-210.

¹¹ LaFeber, *New Empire*, 242-283, but see especially 277-283.

¹² LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1984* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 242-43.

¹³ LaFeber, *The Clash*, immigration on 88, 104-06; Woodrow Wilson on 123-24; World War II on 217-18.

¹⁴ LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

most compelling, but appreciated that the historical actors had rich lives and broad perspectives. He thought it offered a well-rounded, persuasive narrative. In LaFeber's work, we see that money is always a motivator, but rarely the only one. The continuing appeal of his scholarship stems from the ways he weaves that complex story.

ESSAY BY GREG GRANDIN, YALE UNIVERSITY

“The Best Matrix: Thoughts on the Timeliness of Walt LaFeber”

“I see no reason to conclude that my view of the early cold war was a mistake,” Walter LaFeber said in early 1980.¹

LaFeber’s confidence came at an unsettled moment in history. It seemed as if the revisionist school of Cold War history was in ascendance, but the Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan. The ‘third world’ was in revolt, with revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua, as Washington, after losing Southeast Asia, was apparently winding down its covert wars and counterinsurgencies. William Appleman Williams was president of the Organization of American Historians, yet Ronald Reagan would soon be president of the United States. In office, Reagan committed to launching what Noam Chomsky, in 1982, called a “New Cold War” and Fred Halliday, a year later, described as the “second Cold War.”² The pushback against Cold War revisionism – the challenge by critical scholars like LaFeber to the orthodox interpretations of the Cold War (which held Moscow liable for the breakdown of the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union) – was slow to gain headwind, but after Reagan’s election it would grow in intensity, no less hot than the controversy today over the relationship of slavery to the American Revolution. In each case, a single question – who bears responsibility for starting the Cold War? Did North American rebels break from London to preserve slavery? – struck a nerve.

Walt was a gentle man and a generous scholar, an unlikely intellectual insurrectionist. But he was steadfast. Along with Thomas McCormick and Lloyd Gardner, LaFeber was part of the original vanguard trinity out of Wisconsin influenced by William Appleman Williams and Fred Harvey Harrington. Along with other New Left scholars, they were committed to turn diplomatic history into a field of critical inquiry.³ Walt’s first book, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, published in 1963 and based on his dissertation, won the American Historical Association’s Beveridge Award, an early sign that the field indeed was changing.⁴ He followed up in 1967 with *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966*, among the first books to directly challenge the consensus position regarding the Cold War. Many subsequent editions brought the history covered to 2006, fifteen years after most historians date the end of the Cold War (LaFeber historicized to the beat of his own periodizations). Walt, a midwestern Presbyterian and Eisenhower man (before he met Williams), held no illusions about Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s brutality. He was also aware that postwar antagonism between Moscow and Washington was relational, pushed forward by the contretemps of distrust and overreaction.

Yet LaFeber starts his account with Stalin’s begging U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to open a second front in Europe. “Twice Roosevelt promised an invasion. Twice

¹ Charles Mohr, “Historians See a New Cold War Trend,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1980.

² Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War: Essays on the Current Crisis and How We Got There* (Pantheon: New York, 1982); Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983)

³ Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (Routledge: New York, 1995).

⁴ Walter LaFeber *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

he and Churchill reneged.”⁵ The Red Army was left to save the Soviet Union and most of Europe on its own. At war’s end, even as President Harry Truman was signing executive orders, George Kennan was sending long telegrams, and congress was funding a peacetime military buildup, much of the Soviet Union was still in rubble, its peoples traumatized, hungry. The United States, in contrast, emerged with, as has been said, a preponderance of power and thus a preponderance of possibilities to create a world that wasn’t in permanent lock down. Many saw a chance to transform Washington’s wartime alliance with Moscow into a postwar working relationship -- to use the exhilaration of defeating fascism to build a world that everyone everywhere, according to a report done at the time, wanted: one governed by social democracy.⁶ To avoid an atomic arms race. And to create a domestic society different from the one that was created: subordinated to the national security state and primed to fight cruel, escalating wars around the globe. But Truman and his advisors quickly foreclosed on such possibilities and geared the vast resources and inexhaustible self-regard of the most formidable nation in world history to contain a country that had sacrificed itself to defeat Nazi Germany.⁷

So over the course of many editions of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, no recantation, not even after the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to vindicate orthodoxy (by then called post-revisionism), was forthcoming.

“An End to which Cold War?” Walt asked in *Diplomatic History* in 1992.⁸ Here, he previewed the kind of pluralistic definition of the “Cold War” that has today become standard stuff among historians. He identified four distinct “Cold Wars.” Not one of them started at the end of World War Two.

The first of LaFeber’s four Cold Wars had begun in the early twentieth century, with Washington’s efforts to shape and control post-World War I Europe, a struggle that after the Second World War evolved into the Cold War proper. The second was “the ongoing struggle between the world’s commercial centers and outlying countries that provide markets and raw materials.”⁹ This was, to use now common terms of art, the Cold War in the Third World or the Global Cold War, where anticommunism, decolonization, and the drive by industrialized countries to keep access to markets and resources led in many places to hot wars and genocides (as in Indonesia).

The third Cold War LaFeber references was fought within the United States, over the question of how to reconcile an open, democratic, competitive, individualist society with the demands of a “consensual, secret, militaristic” foreign-policy apparatus. Like his first two “Cold Wars,” LaFeber sees this conflict as deep rooted, going back at least to the territorial expansionism of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The “apotheosis of executive power” that took place after 1947 led “not unnaturally” to Watergate (which though remembered as a domestic crime was at its core a cover-up of the illegal bombing of Cambodia) and “the much greater danger of the Iran-

⁵ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), 9.

⁶ William Shirer, “Majority Wants Socialism,” *Boston Globe*, November 4, 1945.

⁷ Four years after the publication of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, Rex Tugwell’s memoir supported many of LaFeber’s assessments, describing Roosevelt’s successor as incurious, covering up insecurity with a stubborn belligerence that all but assured that among all the policy options available to the most powerful nation in history, the worst would be picked. “Opportunity for a mistake of this colossal size is not given to many men,” Tugwell comments specifically about the possibility of foregoing an atomic arms race. “It was given to Truman, and it must be said that he made the most of it.” Rexford G. Tugwell, *Off Course: From Truman to Nixon* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 162

⁸ LaFeber, “An End to Which Cold War?” *Diplomatic History*, 16: 1 (1992): 61-65.

⁹ LaFeber, “An End to Which Cold War?” 63

¹⁰ LaFeber builds on this argument that the roots of the twentieth-century’s imperial presidency aren’t to be found in World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, or the Cold War as a whole but in the expansionist, industrialist nineteenth century, in LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), published two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.)

contra subversion.”¹¹ The end of the Soviet Union notwithstanding, these three conflicts remained very much unsettled.

The fourth and final “Cold War” is close to the standard definition of the Moscow-Washington stand-off, though LaFeber argues it started not in 1947, nor even 1917 but rather in the 1890s. This Cold War the United States undeniably won, though LaFeber, with not a little vatic foresight, worried that the potential breaking up of the Soviet Union into “quasi-independent republics” could return Europe to the instability that led the continent into the First World War. “Revisionist history, rather than liberal history,” LaFeber said in 1968, “better explains—and even forecasts” the tragedy of Vietnam.¹² He would continue to say much the same of the wars Washington fought after the Soviet Union was no more.

LaFeber’s sure footing can be found in his method. He was a master of the wide angle and long view, of tracing the longue-durée continuities that motivated United States policy. He was of course tuned to economics, and like Williams emphasized the importance of the crisis of the 1890s, when empire’s footmen and butlers, its policy- and opinion-makers, were counted on to open doors for capital. Yet, ultimately, he was what Allen Hunter has called an “internalist,” interested in identifying the domestic dynamics, the inner contradictions, of the United States’ drive outward.¹³

The United States, runs one throughline argument in LaFeber’s scholarship, imagines an antagonist, and then puts into place policies that calls the antagonist into being. The task of the diplomatic historian, LaFeber said, is to “move beyond” a focus on “what we said to them, they to us, and we to ourselves” and grapple with the imagination, with the long-term social relations that create ideology.¹⁴

Where is fancy bred, in the heart or in the head? In both heart and head, Walt would answer, rejecting the polarizing premises of realism and idealism, a polarity that obscures more than it reveals. And, anyway, the interesting question isn’t *where*? But *how*? LaFeber, like Williams, was often tagged as an economic determinist but he focused, in *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, not on corporate men but a theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, to tease out the sprouts of Cold War fancy. “Not since Jonathan Edwards’ day of the 1740’s,” Walt wrote, “had an American theologian so affected his society and, like Edwards, Niebuhr emphasize the role of sin and sinful power in that society.”¹⁵ LaFeber had an ear for the fantastical that, for high-level policy makers, indistinguishable from foreign relations. “Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?” is a quotation from Thomas Jefferson used by George W. Bush in his first inaugural address, which LaFeber cites in his dissection of the Bush Doctrine.¹⁶ In *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, he quotes Louis Halle, of George Kennan’s Policy Planning Staff, comparing “the Moscovite tyranny that was spreading from the East” to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which, Halle said, “enshrines the mood and emotion of those long years.”¹⁷ One ring to rule them all.

¹¹ LaFeber, “An End to Which Cold War?” 64.

¹² Walter LaFeber, “War: Cold,” *Cornell Alumni News*, 71 (Oct. 1968), reprinted in James Compton, ed., *America and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 185.

¹³ Allen Hunter, “Introduction: The Limits of Vindicationists Scholarship,” in Allen Hunter, ed., *Rethinking the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 12.

¹⁴ Cited in Alfred Stepan review of *Inevitable Revolutions*, “Dispatching the Marines,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1983.

¹⁵ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), 40

¹⁶ LaFeber, “The Bush Doctrine,” *Diplomatic History*, 26: 4 (Fall 2002): 543-558, 553.

¹⁷ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 13.

Williams took most of the nasty hits from critics. The *American Historical Review* gave *The Tragedy of American History* to the brother of Allen and John Forster Dulles to review. Foster Rhea Dulles described Williams as a “perverse historian,” obsessed and arrogant. Dulles also took issue with the book’s use of “structure” as a verb.¹⁸ Oscar Handlin judged *Contours of American History* an “elaborate hoax” and “altogether farcical.”¹⁹ Walt received some criticism – Arthur Schlesinger Jr. panned *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (1983) in the *Washington Post* for relying on the concept of *neo-dependency* and for attributing “to capitalism what is the inevitable, if deplorably,” actions of the United States in Central America.²⁰

Walt could be sharp in his defense of totality. “The war, racism, domestic violence, and sundry economic ills pose a fundamental challenge to the whole system,” he wrote, on the eve of Richard Nixon’s election in 1968. And “revisionists have constructed the best matrix within which to study that challenge in its entirety.”²¹ Look at the “whole system,” or don’t bother looking at all.

LaFeber was cool, skilled at understatement even when he was saying things quite brazen. This ability set him off from Williams, whose prose suggests an author who was emotionally invested in the possibility of a better United States. In this sense, despite his Marxist bona fides, Williams is more akin to The *New York Times*’ 1619 Project authors, who hope that recognition of the nation’s “original sin” will help create a new founding myth on which to re-legitimize the liberal national project.²² Williams wanted a new foundation too, not for liberalism – which he despised as a heretical denial of the communal and interdependent nature of human beings – but for a sustainable, democratic socialist commonwealth. Williams believed that imperialism, even more than wage labor, alienated humans from themselves. It was in the arena of foreign relations that hegemony was forged – hegemony not over other nations but among social groups and political constituencies within the United States. William’s quest to break to imperial spell was relentless: First, show how deeply rooted the expansionist impulse was to the nation’s founding and ongoing existence. Second, find something in United States history, anything, that might be redeemable, unalienated, and non-imperial on which to build an alternative. Williams peeled away, back to Lyndon B. Johnson’s poor Texas roots, back to Herbert Hoover’s refusal to escalate against Japan, back to the Articles of Confederation, back to British mercantile Christian theorists. He never found a usable past, a frustration that bred an increasingly feverish writing style. Come home America, said George McGovern in his 1972 run to unseat Nixon. America was never *just* home, said Williams.

Walt’s prose was more matter of fact, even as he was laying responsibility for Pearl Harbor on Washington’s open-door policy or describing the killing of thousands of Japanese civilians *after* Nagasaki in air attacks as Truman dithered. Even as he was writing about U.S.-funded death squad massacres in Central America and holding Washington entirely responsibility for the carnage. In El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and

¹⁸ Foster Rhea Dulles, “Review of *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*,” *American Historical Review*, Volume/Number (July 1959), 1022;

¹⁹ Cited in Buhle and Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams*, 136.

²⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, “The U.S. and Central America: A No-Win Game,” *Washington Post* November 6, 1983.

²¹ LaFeber, “*War: Cold*,” *Cornell Alumni News*, 71 (Oct. 1968), reprinted in James Compton, ed., *America and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 1972);, 182

²² For “Original Sin,” see Nikole Hannah-Jones’s “Chapter One,” in the volume published on the Project Nikole Hannah-Jones, et al, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York, Random House 2021), 32.

Guatemala, the United States insists both on economic policies that “inevitably” generate political turmoil and resistance and on security policies that “inevitably” generate repression.

I knew Walt personally only in passing, but, to me, his bearing seemed courtly and ever slightly amused, certainly more indulgent than Williams’s prose intensity. Style forgives a lot, and Walt’s tone didn’t unnerve more orthodox historians, who often described him as clubbable, as Schlesinger did when he deemed Walt “moderate and intelligent.”²³ A responsible revisionist.

The backlash against Cold War revisionism gained moment after Reagan’s election. As LaFeber’s remarks above suggest, world events in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to be playing out a script written by the revisionists themselves. The dissenting tradition in the US academy is long and reaches well back beyond Williams, Harrington, and even Charles Beard. But it does sometimes seem as if simply raising questions related to the origins of the Cold War was akin to Eve biting the apple, casting the nation from its bliss to confront questions: Who did the work? Where did the land come from? Why so many wars and coups? Who rules? Who killed Patrice Lumumba? Fred Hampton? What was the “role of sin and sinful power” in the creation of the United States?

The counterthrust did come, led by scholars, John Lewis Gaddis prominent among them. Unlike the quick-on-the-draw reaction by some esteemed historians against The 1619 Project, “postrevisionists” were, for the most part, methodical. They took seriously, at least at first, the claims and interpretive power of scholars like LeFeber, with post-revisionists ‘complicating’ their strongest arguments. But with the demise of the Soviet Union and what was left of the New Left, some turned triumphal and vindicationist. Gaddis’s *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, published half a decade after the demise of the USSR, essentially said the United States won the Cold War because it was good, and proof of its goodness is the fact that it won the Cold War.²⁴

As with the case of The 1619 Project, scholarly reaction led by mostly liberals underpinned a rightwing reaction. The New Right is highly ideological, by which I mean it has a sharp sense of itself and its opposition. And it knows the importance of history as a political weapon. Many of its leaders, representing different traditions some more respectable than others, went, as soon as the Berlin Wall fell, on the offensive against the New Left ‘matrix,’ waging two highly visible battles.

The first was launched by the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, who in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial attacked the National History Standards Project, which was meant to incorporate mildly critical, diverse, and multicultural perspectives of U.S. history into the K-12 curriculum.²⁵ “Grim and gloomy” she called the Standards, compiled by scholars, according to an unnamed historian cited by Chaney, “pursuing their revisionist agenda” and were “no longer bothered to conceal their great hatred of traditional history.”²⁶ The cult of the US constitution didn’t start with the attack on National Standards, but it gained new members and new energy. Critics like Cheney made much of the fact that the Standards barely mentioned the

²³ “The U.S. and Central America: A No-Win Game,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 1983.

²⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Lynne V. Cheney, “The End of History,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1994.

²⁶ Chapter one of Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn’s *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Random House, 1998), for an account of Cheney’s broadside against National Standards. The “grim and gloomy” quotation comes from an interview with Jane Pauley, cited in Nash et al, *History on Trial*, 4.

Constitution, and then only to point out its contradictions, that it “side-tracked the movement to abolish slavery that had taken rise in the revolutionary era.” In terms of the Cold War and subsequent foreign policy, the authors of the Standards took the mildest approach, asking that students be able to “demonstrate understanding of the origins and domestic consequences of the cold war” and to analyze “the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations’ Vietnam policy.” Four days after Cheney’s editorial, Rush Limbaugh joined the fight, telling his fast-growing audience that the object of National Standards is to teach children that “our country is inherently evil.”²⁷

The *New York Times* reported on Cheney’s criticism but not on the content of the Standards, under the headline: “Plan to Teach U.S. History is Said to Slight White Males.”²⁸ In an essay titled “The 1619 Project and the long Battle over U.S. History,” Jake Silverstein, one of the editors of the project, recounts the fight over the National History Standards as part of more than a century-long fight over the politicization of national history.²⁹ Silverstein, though, focuses entirely on domestic history, ignoring controversies related to the origins of the Cold War, the dropping of atomic bombs, Vietnam, coups, covert operations, war crimes, and other foreign actions. The “best matrix” would highlight the linkages between the foreign and domestic, as Walt taught us to do.

LaFeber counted four Cold Wars. The backlash to National Standards that ran through the halls of the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Eagle Forum, rightwing talk radio added a fifth: a war against those trying to create a more egalitarian, sustainable country, who wanted, as their precursors wanted in 1945, to cash in a peace dividend to fund domestic reform and redress historic wrongs. “There is no ‘After the Cold War’ for me,” Irving Kristol wrote. “So far from having ended, my cold war has increased in intensity, as sector after sector has been ruthlessly corrupted by the liberal ethos.”³⁰ Kristol agreed with Walt that the end of the Soviet Union settled nothing. “Now that the other ‘Cold War’ is over,” Kristol said, “the real Cold War has begun.” “It is a conflict I shall be passing on to my children and grandchildren.”³¹

The second high-profile battle over history was the planned 1995 Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian that was cancelled after a rightwing-led campaign because it encouraged visitors to think about the morality and strategic necessity of dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima civilians. Walt joined the Historians Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima, an organization that included not just revisionists but cold war liberals like Gaddis Smith and Stanley Hoffman.³² Eric Foner and Melvyn Leffler signed the Committee’s statement. John Lewis Gaddis did not.

²⁷ Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, for Limbaugh quotation. Recently, Senator Mitch McConnell plagiarized Rush Limbaugh, writing to President Joseph Biden’s Department of Education to complain about its American History and Civic Education grants. “Our children,” McConnell wrote, shouldn’t “be taught that our country is inherently evil.” Cited in Andrew Ujifusa, “GOP Leader: Biden Grant Plan Referencing Anti-Racism, 1619 Project is ‘Divisive Nonsense,’” April 30, 2021, *Education Week*, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/gop-leader-biden-grant-plan-referencing-anti-racism-1619-project-is-divisive-nonsense/2021/04>

²⁸ October 26, 1994.

²⁹ “The 1619 Project and the Long Battle over U.S. History,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2021.

³⁰ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 276

³¹ Irving Kristol, “My Cold War,” in Nikolas Gvosdev, *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism: A Postscript* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 188

³² In 2003, LaFeber, joining a much larger slate of scholars including social historians of gender and slavery such as Linda Gordon and Ira Berlin, signed on to a protest issued by Committee for a National Discussion of Nuclear History and Current Policy, in protest of another planned exhibit of the Enola Gay, this one more celebratory. The Committee especially objected to the comment by the museum’s director that the point of the exhibition is to display the

These pitched battles over history, with a tenacious rightwing, came just after total victory over the Soviet Union. The United States stood unchallenged at the apex of its power. Walt did hope that the end of the USSR would have the effect of creating a space for honest debate, for “carrying Americans back to history.”³³ But a good part of the country was then being hit badly by a bipartisan one-two punch.

The first was neoliberalism. Second, the destruction of social institutions that might have mitigated the worst of neoliberalism, such as unions and government welfare programs. There existed no stable basis on which a postwar common good could be established, through which old divisions, simultaneously aggravated and suppressed by the Cold War, could be transcended. They only deepened once a common enemy exited the field. The backlash against the National History Standards came shortly after President Bill Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into law. The outrage over the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibition took place after Republicans won a majority in the House, in large part thanks to Clinton’s unpopular push for NAFTA.

“The 1945 to late 1980s era now appears as an American Augustan Age,” Walt wrote in his “Which Cold War?” essay, “when the problems of the old republic and the threats abroad were disciplined by consensus at home and overwhelming power overseas.”³⁴ Now, though, with the neoliberal turn, the terms flipped. Endless war abroad has its match at home in an endless culture war. The Right learned that picking fights over “politically correct” or “morally equivalent” history was one good way to camouflage their war against a more equal and democratic society as a populist clash against elites.

Walter LaFeber came of intellectual age during the height of what his generation called corporate liberalism. He lived long enough to see that hegemony shattered, and public debate locked not into stale top-down consensus but permanent polarization.

In “War: Cold,” an essay written in 1968, LaFeber lamented the refusal of liberals to take their own ideology seriously, to understand ideology not just in negative terms, as something that beguiles opponents, but as a counterintuitive prerequisite for self-awareness.³⁵ LaFeber quoted his intellectual comrade, the American Studies scholar Warren Susman, to note the “singularly anti-historical spirit” that befell the nation’s political class at the Second World War’s end. This was worrying, LaFeber believed, for, still quoting Susman, “it was precisely because in our kind of social order history becomes a key to ideology, a key to the world view that shapes programs and actions in the present and the future.” Republicans, and the broader Right, know this. The leaders of the party that claims to stand against the forces of reaction don’t. Offered a chance to shift the fight onto a trans-racial and cross-class terrain, as the Bernie Sanders campaign tried to do in 2016 and 2020, corporate and Democratic-Party elites, along with their pundit representatives, balked. They were happy to continue to fight

Enola Gay “in all its glory as a magnificent technological achievement.” Technocracy, under neoliberalism, is often presented as apolitical and non-ideological, but this has to be among the most technocratic-ideological sentences ever uttered. The Committee wrote that such a statement reflects an “extraordinary callousness toward the victims, indifference to the deep divisions among American citizens about the propriety of these actions, and disregard for the feelings of most of the world’s peoples.” This exhibition went on as planned.

³³ LaFeber, “Which Cold War?” 65.

³⁴ LaFeber, “Which Cold War?” 65.

³⁵ LaFeber, “War: Cold,” *Cornell Alumni News*, 71 (Oct. 1968).

the forever culture war. Lest they be carried “back into history” to face the mess they made of things since the end of the Cold War.

With “the collapse of the Communist empire,” LaFeber wrote, “both foreign and domestic affairs could become more interesting.”³⁶ Walt meant this hopefully, I think, despite that he possessed an historical imagination that saw the “whole system,” and seeing the whole system rarely offers openings for optimism. In any case, then came Clinton’s economic restructuring, the gutting of welfare, and crime bills, followed by the election of George Bush, 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the housing-market crash.

LaFeber understood the overarching justification of Washington’s response to 9/11 – encapsulated in what was called The Bush Doctrine -- as the product of a longstanding quest for free range in foreign affairs:

U.S. unilateralism provided the freedom of action for diplomacy and military operations, a freedom highly valued in over two centuries of American foreign power. However, the Bush administration's unilateralism exacted a price. Unilateralism was the end result of an American exceptionalism that in 1917 to 1919 and 1954 to 1975, among other eras, proved to be a dangerous assumption on which to predicate a policy. In the post-September 11 world, exceptionalism, combined with the immensity of American power, hinted at the dangers of being a nation so strong that others could not check it, and so self-righteous that it could not check itself.³⁷

Walt wrote the above before the invasion of Afghanistan. He didn’t have to wait for what was to come to know that nothing good would come.

³⁶ LaFeber “An End to Which Cold War?” *Diplomatic History*, 16:1 (1992): 61-65, 65.

³⁷ LaFeber, “The Bush Doctrine,” *Diplomatic History*, 26:4 (Fall 2002): 543-558, 558.

ESSAY BY JUSTIN HART, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

“The Politics of Walter LaFeber’s Critique of US Foreign Policy”

When I heard that Walter LaFeber died, a little over a year ago, I immediately thought of two things: First, my initial encounter with his ideas, when I read *The New Empire* over the holiday break between my first and second semesters in graduate school; and, second, his celebrated “final lecture,” given in 2006 at the Beacon Theater in New York City (where it had to be moved after the initial venue didn’t have enough seats to accommodate the huge demand for tickets). Both of those moments speak, in somewhat different ways, to the thing I most admire about Walter LaFeber’s work: the way that he made himself intelligible and indispensable to students and scholars across the political spectrum. As such, these two moments also serve as the bookends—one at the beginning of his career; the other at the end—to the principal concern of this essay: the politics of Walter LaFeber’s scholarship, and how he could speak to many different audiences at once.

Let me begin with my reaction to reading *The New Empire*. I still remember cracking open my copy of the book and almost immediately doing a double-take when I got to this line, on the third page of the preface:

I must add that I have been profoundly impressed with the statesmen of these decades....I found both the policy makers and the businessmen of this era to be responsible, conscientious men who accepted the economic and social realities of their day, understood domestic and foreign problems, debated issues vigorously, and especially were unafraid to strike out on new and uncharted paths in order to create what they sincerely hoped would be a better nation and a better world.¹

This was how one of the charter members of the Wisconsin school of “revisionist” diplomatic history chose to start his first book? This was one of the signposts texts of the academic New Left? I was dumbfounded. I remember going that week to talk to my advisor, Lloyd Gardner, who was one of LaFeber’s oldest and best friends, dating to their time together at the University of Wisconsin, where they studied together with the legendary diplomatic historian, William Appleman Williams. I told Gardner about my disbelief at reading that line in the preface. He smiled and said, simply, “that’s Walt.”²

Now, to his final lecture at the Beacon Theater. What immediately becomes clear upon watching that lecture, which is available online, is that it is a window into just how much LaFeber meant to Cornell and how much the university meant to him. He was feted by the president of Cornell, Hunter Rawlings, as well as by Andrew Tisch of the Loews Corporation, one of Cornell’s biggest donors and one of the names (along with his brother) attached to the endowed chair LaFeber occupied toward the end of his career. However, these men were not the only luminaries there that night. Among the many, many people who passed through Walter LaFeber’s classes at Cornell were President Bill Clinton’s National Security Advisor, Sandy Berger, and President George W. Bush’s National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley. Berger was there that evening and

¹ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), ix.

² Private conversation, January 1997.

Hadley was supposed to be there, too, but had to cancel at the last minute, as LaFeber noted early in the lecture.³

After twenty minutes or so thanking all the people who made his career possible, all done without notes as was his custom, LaFeber launched into the historical part of his lecture, which was a savage indictment of President Woodrow Wilson and his impulse to make the world “safe for democracy.” LaFeber argued that the founding generation, which essentially created democracy in America, knew this was a bad idea, and that the generation immediately following Wilson knew it was a bad idea. Then, at some point in the mid-late 1960s (left unsaid—right in the middle of the Vietnam War), there was a Wilsonian renaissance in America. Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, and so on, all talked like Wilson and based US foreign policy on exporting democracy.

That whole timeline is debatable, of course, and no one would be more skilled at debating that interpretation of US foreign relations than Walter LaFeber, but the subtext that went unmentioned in the lecture, which was given in 2006, was that the United States, post-9/11, had geared its entire foreign policy around creating democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq. President George W. Bush was like “Wilson on steroids,” as Howard Fineman, the NBC News political commentator said of Bush’s second inaugural address at the height of the Iraq War.⁴ And here was Walter LaFeber making this case against Wilson before an audience that was supposed to have included George W. Bush’s National Security Advisor, his own former student, Stephen Hadley. It was all (relatively) subtle. LaFeber never mentioned the name Bush; he never mentioned contemporary US foreign policy in the Middle East; but for an audience in 2006, the argument was unmistakable: The Bush administration had followed in the footsteps of the failed policies of the past. Yet he received a standing ovation from the well-heeled crowd that surely included a number of people who had voted not once but twice for the then president; a crowd that was also supposed to have included one of that president’s most influential foreign policymakers.

Thinking about these two moments sent me on a quest: I wanted to know how he did it—how he made his views crystal clear without immediately alienating those who saw the world differently than he did. So, I decided to reread all of his books, many of which I had not looked at in two decades. What I found was that the nature of his critique of US foreign policy allowed him to thread an extraordinarily difficult needle, criticizing America’s policies without necessarily criticizing the nation and its ideologies. Part of what set LaFeber apart, certainly from his teacher William Appleman Williams, and perhaps from his fellow Wisconsin school revisionists as well, was that his critique was far more realist than idealist in its orientation.⁵

The problem that LaFeber typically identified with America’s foreign policies was not that they were immoral, but that they were unwise. Those who subscribed to the notion that US foreign policy “denies and subverts American ideas and ideals” (the most famous line from Williams’s most famous book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*) certainly found much evidence to support that position in LaFeber’s books.⁶ However,

³ The “final lecture” can be viewed in its entirety at the end of this article: Blaine Friedlander, “Walter LaFeber, Revered History Professor, Dies,” *Cornell Chronicle*, March 10, 2021, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2021/03/walter-lafeber-revered-history-professor-dies> [accessed May 7, 2022].

⁴ “Hardball with Chris Matthews’ for Jan. 20,” January 25, 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6867051> [accessed May 7, 2022].

⁵ It should be noted that although LaFeber studied with Williams and was obviously deeply influenced by his analysis of US foreign policy, particularly the late-nineteenth century imperial turn, his dissertation supervisor at Wisconsin was actually the veteran diplomatic historian Fred Harvey Harrington.

⁶ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009): 291.

for those who cared less about the morality of US foreign policy and much more about the success of the American empire, LaFeber's writing offered just as much to consider. It is absolutely possible to read his works with an eye toward strengthening, rather than undermining, America's empire through smarter decision-making.

It is not that moral judgments were absent from LaFeber's books. He did sometimes offer candid assessments—particularly of the character of the people he wrote about, and usually in cutting asides. The Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa, for example, was described as “considerably more enlightened and humane than most European conquerors.”⁷ Joseph Stalin, on the other hand, was condemned for displaying “considerably more brutality and less regard for the formalities of the United Nations Charter” than his counterparts in the Truman administration.⁸ (Although President Harry Truman, to be sure, was not spared either, with his initial knowledge of foreign policy described as “pitifully weak.”)⁹ Korea (presumably both North and South) was portrayed as “a Cold War-wracked country which lacked everything except authoritarian governments, illiteracy, cholera epidemics, and poverty.”¹⁰

LaFeber was particularly direct when it came to racism, such as his sly quip that early Americans could reap the rewards of a “roughly equitable” society, “especially if they were white and male.”¹¹ He was equally clear in describing the racism of the more recent past, in which the United States held a “precarious position among black Africans” because of its refusal to sanction South Africa for apartheid.¹² He was most scathing when he found policymakers making remarks that unintentionally revealed a highly problematic approach to world affairs, such as George Kennan's off-hand comment that Latin American states must prioritize “the protection of our raw materials.” LaFeber added “*sic.*” after the word “our” in his rendering of the quote, and then returned to the damning line again several times thereafter.¹³ He gave similar treatment to the claim, typically attributed to George W. Bush's political advisor Karl Rove, that “we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”¹⁴ Most often, though, LaFeber's critique of US foreign policy resembled the line typically misattributed to the French diplomat Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord: “It was worse than a crime; it was a mistake.”¹⁵

One thing that helped to make this catalogue of America's many mistakes in foreign policymaking persuasive across the political spectrum was LaFeber's reverence for the founding generation. “The generation that gave Americans their independence and Constitution,” he argued in *The American Age*, his hugely influential textbook on US foreign relations, “was the only generation in US history that combined the nation's political leaders and its intellectual leaders in the same people.”¹⁶ He frequently referred to John Quincy Adams as the nation's greatest secretary of state, because he admired statesmen who were able to secure American interests

⁷ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, Updated Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

⁸ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1967), 12.

⁹ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966*, 2.

¹⁰ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966*, 95.

¹¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, Expanded Edition, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 13.

¹² LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1992*, 7th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

¹³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 107-110.

¹⁴ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 420 & 430.

¹⁵ On the misattribution of the quote, see “Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord,” *Wikiquote*, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Charles_Maurice_de_Talleyrand-P%C3%A9rigord [accessed May 11, 2022].

¹⁶ LaFeber, *The American Age: US Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, 1750 to the Present*, Second Edition, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 40.

without resort to war. On the other hand, he railed against policies that resulted in complicated overseas conflicts.¹⁷

There was sometimes a tension in LaFeber's writings between praising certain empire builders while condemning the violence that allowed them to build the empire. Quincy Adams's greatest achievement, of course, was serving as the principal author and advocate for the policy that became known as the Monroe Doctrine, which expanded the reach and influence of the United States throughout the Western Hemisphere without provoking a costly war with any of the great powers of Europe. Overall, LaFeber was not opposed to American expansion, as such, but he was deeply concerned about the long-term adverse effects of policies pursued for short-term gain—what today is usually called 'blowback.' Consequently, he had an ambiguous—and arguably contradictory—take on the history of violence and dispossession of America's indigenous peoples. He praised Quincy Adams for his savvy in fleecing Florida and certain rights on the Pacific from Spain in the Transcontinental Treaty of 1818—a diplomatic maneuver only made possible through the violent overreach of General Andrew Jackson's unauthorized assault on the Seminole people. At the same time, *The American Age* did far more than most diplomatic histories of that era in treating Native American history as integral to the history of US foreign relations. And he did not shy away from chronicling the crude racism and unrepentant violence of early Anglo-American settlers in North America.¹⁸

Aside from including the treatment of Native Americans, LaFeber's celebration of America's earliest foreign policies and his indictment of its twentieth-century imperialist tendencies was to some extent an old-fashioned conservative critique of US foreign policy overreach.¹⁹ LaFeber bristled at the term "isolationism" ("one of the most misunderstood words in the US vocabulary"²⁰) as a useless pejorative, but his writings, particularly on early American foreign relations, reflected the sense of a wayward country allowing original sin to lead it further and further away from the garden of Eden. Read through a Christian and/or Marxist lens, one can find evidence in his writings for treating money as the root of all evil, but his predominant critique of US foreign policy was a realist one. He accepted that great powers would act in their own self-interest, and he accepted the United States as a great power. However, he deplored the hubristic combination of greed and ignorance that too often resulted in horrendous carnage and death that, not coincidentally, damaged the nation's prestige abroad.

For the remainder of this essay, I wish to develop this argument through a close reading of LaFeber's scholarly monographs, tracing common strains of analysis across a series of books that cover an astonishing breadth of time and space. The books that established Walter LaFeber's reputation as one of the preeminent historians of his generation were his two volumes published in the 1960s: *The New Empire* (1963), which became the

¹⁷ For LaFeber's take on John Quincy Adams, see "Chapter 3: The First, the Last: John Quincy Adams and the Monroe Doctrine (1815-1828)," in *The American Age*, as well as LaFeber's largely forgotten edited volume, *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965). LaFeber described Quincy Adams as America's "greatest secretary of state" in both of these titles, as well as several other of his writings.

¹⁸ On the role of Native American history in *The American Age*, see each of the first six chapters, which all contained sections on the violence Anglo settlers inflicted upon indigenous people throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹⁹ On the label "conservative," I was quite struck by the comment of LaFeber's student, Frank Costigliola, at the 2021 SHAFR panel that precipitated this roundtable. Costigliola noted that LaFeber was born into a conservative Republican family in a small town in Indiana, where his father owned a grocery store. This is not to say that LaFeber never abandoned this perspective, but it speaks to some of the complications in decoding his politics.

²⁰ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed., 398.

standard treatment of late nineteenth century foreign policy thinking for more than a generation; and *America, Russia, and the Cold War* (1967), which became the most-assigned textbook on the Cold War for forty-plus years.

The New Empire, as noted before, was hardly a searing indictment of post-bellum US empire building. An intellectual history more than anything else, the book focused primarily on tracing patterns of thought. In so doing, LaFeber reached one conclusion that was, to him, absolutely nonnegotiable: These men (and they were all men) that he wrote about knew exactly what they were doing in laying the groundwork for empire. Contrary to the then-dominant interpretation of turn-of-the-century imperialism, LaFeber argued that “the United States did not set out on an expansionist path in the late 1890s in a sudden, spur-of-the-moment fashion...Americans neither acquired this empire during a temporary absence of mind nor had the empire forced upon them.”²¹

The explanation for why Americans pursued this course of action was equally direct: In support of the Open Door thesis advanced by William Appleman Williams in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, LaFeber provided overwhelming evidence that policymakers and intellectuals sought an empire of trade—“not a colonial empire”—to alleviate the periodic depressions and labor violence that resulted from overproduction in the Gilded Age. Just in case readers missed his point the first time around, LaFeber rearticulated the thesis at the end of Chapter 1: “Displaying a notable lack of any absentmindedness, Americans set out to solve their problems by creating an empire whose dynamic and characteristics marked a new departure in their history...The years between 1850 and 1889 were a period of preparation for the 1890s. These years provided the roots of empire, not the fruit. The fruit of empire would not appear until the 1890s.”²²

There was little sense in *The New Empire* that LaFeber condemned the United States for acquiring an empire. In the conclusion to his long chapter on the War of 1898, he wrote that “a new type of American empire, temporarily clothed in armor, stepped out on the international stage after a half century of preparation to make its claim as one of the great world powers.”²³ Rather, he seemed to condemn Americans—particularly of his own time—for not being honest about what they had done and why they did it. One could take from his argument evidence for the proposition most cogently articulated by his Wisconsin classmate, Thomas McCormick—that the United States had “exported the social question” in pursuing overseas markets to alleviate domestic overproduction, rather than redistributing resources at home.²⁴ But LaFeber never said that. What he said was that the United States had to stop treating imperialism as a great aberration, alien to the American tradition. Tellingly, then, the final line went to Secretary of State William Seward, who described Asia as “the chief theatre of events in the world’s great hereafter.”²⁵

Asia also played an important role in LaFeber’s other major work of the 1960s, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*. Even in the first edition, he insisted upon a global approach to understanding the conflict with the

²¹ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 7.

²² LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 60-61.

²³ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 406.

²⁴ See Chapter 1 of Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1990). This argument was a refinement and elaboration of arguments earlier advanced by Williams in *Tragedy* and, before that, by Charles A. Beard in *The Open Door at Home: A Trial Philosophy of National Interest* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935). On Beard as a precursor to the Wisconsin school, see Justin Hart, “A Note on Charles Austin Beard’s Search for the National Interest,” *Passport* 50 (January 2020).

²⁵ LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 417.

Soviet Union, and the final pages closed with a searing indictment of the war then raging in Southeast Asia.²⁶ The book would ultimately go through ten editions, with new chapters covering the passing years, and new material added to older chapters as fresh scholarship and primary source material became available. However, the original 1967 text remained mostly intact throughout the ten editions, even though by the end the book had really become more of a survey of US foreign relations since 1941, rather than strictly a history of the Cold War.²⁷

Considering the extremely broad view provided in later editions, it is interesting that the first edition was in some ways LaFeber's most traditional diplomatic history, in the sense that it faithfully chronicled the back and forth between the White House and the Kremlin over the first twenty years of the Cold War. What was radical about his approach, if only for its time, was that he insisted upon analyzing Soviet actions through the same realist prism as he analyzed American actions. In other words, this was nothing like George Kennan's take in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," or Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s, interpretation of the "Origins of the Cold War," which portrayed Soviet behavior as pathological and the Truman administration's response (in Schlesinger's words) as "the brave and essential response of free men to communist aggression."²⁸ LaFeber, in contrast, pushed back against the notion that Stalin was "paranoid" and argued that his actions displayed "realism"; a brutal realism, to be sure, but he treated Stalin as a rational actor nonetheless.²⁹

Perhaps the most interesting clue to LaFeber's politics in *America, Russia, and the Cold War* was his running dialogue with the noted theologian and public intellectual, Reinhold Niebuhr, who was widely heralded throughout his lifetime for his religiously-informed realist analysis of international relations. Niebuhr appeared frequently throughout the text to capture the zeitgeist of the time. As a Cold War liberal in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Niebuhr's first appearance came not as a historical ventriloquist for LaFeber. Rather, Niebuhr's argument that "for peace we must risk war...we cannot afford any more compromises" was cited as a description of the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that emerged in the late 1940s.³⁰

Niebuhr's role in the book evolved, though, along with his thinking. *The Irony of American History*, the theologian's landmark text of 1952, provided LaFeber with the perfect distillation of a growing concern for what the Cold War had done to the United States. "To Niebuhr," LaFeber wrote of *Irony*, "Communism remained as evil as it had been in 1947 and 1948, but the United States had become the victim of many of the same inconsistencies and delusions about human nature." He focused particularly on Niebuhr's deep skepticism, in the penultimate section of *Irony*, about fighting the Cold War in Asia—a passage written by Niebuhr in the early 1950s with Korea in mind. For LaFeber, of course, it spoke just as clearly to Vietnam in

²⁶ One can read the shift in tone between LaFeber's first and second books in at least two different ways: Either this was another example of LaFeber praising the empire builders of the late nineteenth century while condemning the violence that empire would produce, particularly in Asia, from 1898 through the 1960s; or, the Vietnam War itself had changed his position on empire between 1963 and 1967. It could, of course, also be some of both. My thanks to Kate Epstein for noting this contradiction in her comments on a draft of this essay.

²⁷ In preparing this essay, I compared the texts of the first edition (1967), the 7th edition (1993), published right after the end of the Cold War, and the 10th edition (2008), the final one, which added a concluding chapter on post-9/11 foreign policy.

²⁸ Mr. X [George Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 4 (July 1947): 566-582; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Origins of the Cold War," 46 (October 1967): 22-52.

²⁹ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 7th ed., 20-21. In footnote 27, LaFeber specifically pushes back against the Schlesinger portrayal of Stalin.

³⁰ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 72. Niebuhr's views in the late 1940s are also discussed on pages 40-43.

the 1960s.³¹ In fact, LaFeber gave Niebuhr the last word in the original edition of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*. Noting that the old Cold War liberal's thinking had evolved to the point that he “condemned the American involvement in Vietnam in the strongest terms” in early 1967, LaFeber praised him for his prescience while denouncing America's delusions about its own power—delusions that led “American officials and public opinion to believe in a military solution for the primary, unsolvable problems.”³²

In later editions of the book, published after the end of the Cold War, LaFeber even added a new quote from Niebuhr about the struggle between “the law in our members which wars against the law that is in our minds.” Between 1989 and 1992, LaFeber argued, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev understood that, even with the decline of the superpower rivalry, if the world did not use the “law that is in our minds” it would continue to experience unchecked conflict and unnecessary violence—the “law in our members.”³³ In hindsight, it really was remarkable that an analysis of the Cold War so indebted to the thinking of someone like Reinhold Niebuhr came across as “radical” in its own time. But, as LaFeber himself said of former Vice President Henry Wallace, who was ex-communicated from the Democratic Party in 1946 for asking uncomfortable questions about the assumptions driving US Cold War policy, the fact “that Americans, then and later, pictured Wallace as a radical indicates the confusion engendered by Cold War tensions.”³⁴

If there is a case to be made for LaFeber as a radical critic of US foreign relations it is probably to be found in his two mid-career books on Latin America, *The Panama Canal* (1978) and *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983). Both books sought an explanation for how the United States had arrived in the 1970s and 1980s at such a crisis in its dealings with Central America. (The subtitle of *The Panama Canal* was “The Crisis in Historical Perspective.”) Consistent with his previous publications, LaFeber probed the deep roots of his subject, dipping into US policy in the nineteenth century before settling on his thesis about the twentieth century. The larger argument of both books was similar, notwithstanding the specific differences between US policy in a country where it controlled an essential economic resource—the canal zone—compared to US policy in the neighboring countries. (Panama was largely excluded from the broader analysis of Central America in *Inevitable Revolutions*, making the latter book sort of a sequel and expansion of the former.) With both books, LaFeber offered an analysis consistent with Immanuel Wallerstein-style world-systems theory. In short, he argued that the United States had consistently supported oligarchs and their representatives on the ground in these countries, over and against the interests of ordinary people, because the oligarchs maintained—often through egregious brutality—the sort of political stability that allowed US economic and geopolitical interests to thrive.³⁵

³¹ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 133-134.

³² LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 259.

³³ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 7th ed., 354-355. In the final edition, published in 2008, LaFeber still thought this argument so relevant that he moved it from the end of the chapter on the end of the Cold War to the end of the (new) final chapter on the War on Terror, so that Niebuhr still got the last word, just as he did in the first edition published over forty years before. See *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 10th ed., 449-450.

³⁴ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 39.

³⁵ Interestingly, in *The Panama Canal*, LaFeber has a footnote (53, n. 8) where he acknowledged the “continued and often unavailing efforts of Professor Thomas Holloway of Cornell to initiate me into the mysteries of dependency theory.” Five years later, in *Inevitable Revolutions*, he titled the Introduction “An Overview of the System” and provided an analysis of the “American system” in Central America heavily indebted to world systems theory. In the introduction, he addressed “dependency theory” specifically in adopting it as his model: “First outlined in the 1960s, the theory of ‘dependency’ has been elaborated until it stands as the most important and provocative method of interpreting US-Latin American relations. Dependency may be generally defined as a way of looking at Latin American development, not in

In *The Panama Canal*, LaFeber offered his customary realist analysis, while also occasionally reminding the reader of the moral costs of pursuing policies rooted in crude power politics. For example, he praised the Clayton-Bulwer treaty of 1850 for securing a US stake in the railroad to be built across the Panamanian isthmus, while avoiding war with Great Britain. Then, on the very next page, he noted that the company that built the Panama railroad got very rich on the backs of the nine thousand-some workers who died in its construction—“one for every railroad tie.”³⁶ Everything in the historical background section of the book built toward the “blowback” argument he sought to make in elucidating the reasons that Panamanians would, in the 1960s and 1970s, rise up against US influence in their country. He noted that Theodore Roosevelt’s aid to the Panamanian revolutionaries who established the country’s independence from Colombia “had no legal or historical basis.”³⁷ Roosevelt’s cardinal sin was that he “never understood how his policies and explanations worsened the problems in the Caribbean area that he tried to stabilize.”³⁸ LaFeber also quoted the sociologist William Graham Sumner to the effect that “we talk of civilizing lower races, but we have never done it yet. We have exterminated them.”³⁹ Later on, he chastised Secretary of State John Foster Dulles for his “unfailing insensitivity.”⁴⁰ And he repeatedly condemned the historical ignorance of American politicians like Strom Thurmond and Ronald Reagan, who believed (wrongly) that the United States owned the Panama Canal as a colonial territory, as if it were Texas or Alaska.⁴¹ Indeed, his ultimate judgment of Reagan’s policy in Panama—a policy based on initial support for the strongman Manuel Noriega before that backfired to the point that the United States launched a coup to remove him in late 1989—was an indictment of the administration’s ignorance of “historic opposition to US interventionism.”⁴²

It was also this ignorance of the United States’ own history in Central America that formed the core of LaFeber’s argument in *Inevitable Revolutions* about what, exactly, made revolutions “inevitable” in Central America. Dating back to the early twentieth century, the United States had made it clear in administration after administration that it would accept only one kind of political and economic arrangement in these countries. More specifically, only certain kinds of redistribution would be allowed. As in Guatemala, or Cuba, or Nicaragua during the Cold War, “when the state moved its people for the sake of national policy...the United States condemned it as smacking of Communist tyranny. If, however, an oligarch forced hundreds of peasants off their land for the sake of his own profit, the United States accepted it as simply the way of the real world.”⁴³ Or, in an even blunter assessment: “The system could work as long as the few in Central America dominated the many.”⁴⁴ LaFeber used a frequent “pressure” metaphor to explain the futility of the long-term disaster US policy had engendered. Kennedy administration policy, for example, “had only heated up the volcano.”⁴⁵ When tensions bubbled up, the United States faced a choice—it could either “work with those revolutionaries to achieve a more orderly and equitable society,” or it could “try to cap the upheavals

isolation, but as part of an international system in which the leading powers (and since 1945, the United States in particular), have used their economic strength to make Latin American development dependent on—and subordinate to—the interests of those leading powers.” See LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 16-17.

³⁶ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 9-10.

³⁷ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 26.

³⁸ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 45.

³⁹ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 44.

⁴⁰ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 96.

⁴¹ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 148-149 & 216-218.

⁴² LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 207.

⁴³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 14.

⁴⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 83.

⁴⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 145.

until the pressure built again to blow the societies apart with even greater force.”⁴⁶ Clearly, in LaFeber’s judgment, the United States had almost always chosen the latter option.

Inevitable Revolutions was unquestionably LaFeber’s most caustic book, simmering with rage at the fundamentally flawed US approach to the region over more than a century. There was even a kind of fatalism to the analysis in which there seemed to be no hope of transcending the mistakes of the past—a past that had made the present crisis “inevitable.” It is perhaps notable in this regard that, of all his books, LaFeber used the largest number of foreign sources in *Inevitable Revolutions*. Although he did no archival research in Central America, he used a number of Spanish-language books, journal articles, and newspapers. This was also the book that most mirrored William Appleman Williams’s idealistic critique of America’s many hypocrisies. Woodrow Wilson, unsurprisingly, received the very Williams-like critique that his “words were betrayed by his actions in Central America,” marking him as “the diplomatic heir of Theodore Roosevelt.”⁴⁷ In the Cold War, the CIA “proved only that it could overthrow, not create, an ongoing government.”⁴⁸ Overall, the United States consistently backed anti-democratic governments that used brutal force to suppress justified anger at oligarchy. When these governments blew up in the 1970s and 1980s, the United States had nowhere to turn. Yet even in this book, it was Hans Morgenthau, the ultimate realist theorist, whose words were used to outline what LaFeber saw as the only possibility for a brighter future: “The real issue facing American foreign policy is not how to preserve stability in the face of revolution, but how to create stability out of revolution.”⁴⁹

LaFeber’s final two monographs, *The Clash* (1997) and *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (1999), took him in a very different direction. In these books, LaFeber sought, through two very different lenses, to grapple with the implications of an American-led—but no longer American-dominated—global capitalist order in the wake of the decline and ultimate demise of the Cold War. The former looked backward for an explanation; the latter projected forward. *The Clash* was also a slightly belated response to the Japanese trade anxieties of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Typical of LaFeber, though, his prescience in terms of timely subject matter was uncanny. Had it been published a few months later he could have added a new epilogue on the Asian financial crisis of 1997.⁵⁰

The Clash was, without a doubt, LaFeber’s most ambitious book (among many ambitious books). It was a cultural as well as a diplomatic history covering the relationship between two major powers over a century and a half. The title of the book captured the thesis well: Despite the fact that the United States and Japan had experienced amity in their relations more often than not since the Perry expedition in 1853, they came to espouse fundamentally different economic visions, particularly regarding their respective roles in China, and

⁴⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 16.

⁴⁷ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 58.

⁴⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 136.

⁴⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 16.

⁵⁰This continued a pattern with his books. A few months after the Updated Edition of the Panama Canal was published in 1989, with a new chapter on the disastrous failure of Reagan’s devolving relationship with Manuel Noriega, Reagan’s successor George H.W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause to overthrow Noriega. The same was true with the Expanded Edition of *Inevitable Revolutions* in 1984, which ends with the problems the United States faced in Nicaragua in supporting the Contras against the Sandinistas—right before the Iran-Contra exchange that nearly brought down Reagan’s presidency. As discussed below, *Michael Jordan and Global Capitalism* would follow the same pattern.

Asia more broadly.⁵¹ Although LaFeber was blunt about the shortcomings of US understandings of Japan—particularly America’s “blatant racism”⁵²—he hardly took the Japanese side. These were rival great powers acting as great powers act; many people died because of their policies—particularly during the most egregious “clash” between the two countries during World War II—and there were few unqualified heroes. The World War II chapter was in many ways the heart of the book and the point to which the entire first half built. Subtitled “The Clash Over Two Visions,” this chapter represented the culmination of a story that began with the Japanese entering the world stage during the Meiji restoration, having developed an imperial agenda to rival that of the United States, Great Britain, and Russia. And, while there were many twists and turns between the late 19th century and the late 1930s, the two powers’ incompatible visions for Asia ultimately put them on a collision course:

For their part, Japanese officials were determined to protect their society’s traditional values by breaking its long dependence on the West (and increasingly on the United States) through the creation of a ‘new order’ in Asia that centered on China and was defined and controlled by Japan. US officials were equally determined to protect their society’s political-economic system by entering an open door to Asian resources, especially China’s, and—in a further giant step—integrating this open Asia into a world free of totalitarian-controlled economies.⁵³

Depending on how one characterizes the economic component of that argument, there could hardly be a more realist analysis of US-Japanese relations.

The last third of the book addressed the Japanese “economic miracle” of the post-war period. LaFeber detailed how Japan recovered from abject destruction in 1945 to return to global prominence by the 1960s, eventually out-manufacturing the United States in certain industries (most famously, automobiles and electronics) by the 1980s. During these years, a new “clash” emerged—one that had become quite heated by the time LaFeber was writing the book in the 1990s: “The root cause...was the US intention to keep Japan dependent, and Japan’s determination to be economically independent.”⁵⁴ With more than a hint of irony, the book closed with the rising influence of China—the long-time object of the US-Japanese imperial rivalry which was now a great military and economic power in its own right, one that was likely to become the dominant power of the twenty-first century. “For Americans,” LaFeber wrote, “the test will be whether they can accept an Asia for and by Asians in which the United States will have a relatively declining role both economically and, despite strong Pentagon objections, militarily.”⁵⁵ He was deeply skeptical that the United States would willingly countenance such a transformation in its historic attitude toward Asia, although technological innovations and the global economy had evolved so rapidly that they now outstripped the ability of US policymakers to dictate the terms of their own engagement. Shining a light on these increasingly rapid changes in the global political economy was the focus of LaFeber’s next, and final, book.

⁵¹The three components of “the clash” thesis—the ostensible partnership periodically strained by fundamentally different visions of capitalism and visions for China—are outlined very clearly in Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: US-Japanese Relations Throughout History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), xviii.

⁵² LaFeber, *The Clash*, 65.

⁵³ LaFeber, *The Clash*, 214.

⁵⁴ LaFeber, *The Clash*, 296.

⁵⁵ LaFeber, *The Clash*, 404.

Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism was both an idiosyncratic and strikingly visionary look at the “powerful forces that will shape the early part of the new century”—forces that first emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s, the years that “the 21st Century began.” Simply put, the transformation of US foreign policy and the larger global economy originated in the “information revolution” and “the new power of US capital and transnational corporations to drive that revolution,” as well as the “reaction—sometimes violent—in the United States and abroad to that revolution.”⁵⁶ The idiosyncratic part of the analysis was LaFeber’s examination of these trends through the biography of the basketball superstar Michael Jordan, as well as the larger culture of Black sports in the United States. In my view, the material on Jordan and the NBA was unoriginal, and the material on Black culture was outdated, at best, even for its time. However, the material on the information revolution and the blowback it engendered (that theme again) was shockingly prescient, capturing the uncertainty and explosiveness of that pre-9/11 moment with remarkable clarity.

In the most interesting part of the Jordan story, LaFeber focused on what he described as the “Faustian bargain” that Jordan and his chief corporate partner, Nike CEO Phil Knight, struck in using the remarkable power and reach of the new cable and internet technologies to make Jordan arguably the most famous person in the world in the 1990s. Jordan and Knight, of course, employed these technologies to showcase Jordan’s extraordinary skill and flair on and off the court, to audiences near and far, making billions of dollars in the process. However, they were totally unprepared for the way that these same processes could be turned against them in broadcasting with equal fervor Jordan’s famous foibles, including marital infidelities and large gambling losses.⁵⁷

LaFeber thus used Jordan as a metaphor to explain a much larger global transformation, noting the way that “the new technology is locking Americans into a sometimes violent global community that too easily resorts to terrorism to fight the United States.” Remarkably, for someone writing in 1999, LaFeber focused near the end of the book on the threat posed by al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden, and pointed out that US officials had “declared what they termed a ‘new war’—the ‘war of the future’—against terrorists such as bin Laden.”⁵⁸ Always attuned to the ironies of American history, LaFeber observed that “Americans love order and seek stability, but insist on expanding a capitalism that often undermines order and generates violent instability.”⁵⁹ He also returned to the theme of his first book, some 35 years earlier, in alluding to the history of the US quest to dominate a global market economy since the late 19th century, and ended *Michael Jordan* with this line: “In the new tightly wired world, Americans cannot escape these questions. They can only begin to deal with them by understanding the history of how we all became part of a global market economy and market society.”⁶⁰

Of course, history—particularly US history—took a sharp, although not entirely unanticipated, turn a little over two years down the road. And LaFeber, in a new and expanded edition of *Michael Jordan* and the final edition of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, sought to place 9/11 and its aftermath in the long trajectory of US foreign policy. In the new final chapter of *Michael Jordan*, LaFeber expanded, not surprisingly, on the Faustian bargain he had developed in the original edition, while noting that 9/11 was a direct attack on “the

⁵⁶ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 13.

⁵⁷ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 17, 86-89.

⁵⁸ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 160.

⁵⁹ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 163.

⁶⁰ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 164.

very buildings” that symbolized the new global capitalism.⁶¹ Even here, though, the ultimate take was a realist one, focusing not on the evil of Bin Laden or blaming the United States for provoking the attacks. Instead, his ultimate call to arms was for Americans to educate themselves on the deep roots of their present predicament: ““The post-1970s technologies were not naturally either good or evil. The new global capitalism, like a steamroller, was going to change the face of the world’s cultures... The question was whether Americans and other peoples could make the needed political decisions to ensure their societies and cultures would be as open, prosperous, and responsible (that is, democratic), as possible.”⁶²

This hope for the future, penned in 2002, would not come to pass. As LaFeber detailed with brutal efficiency in the new final chapter of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, published in 2006, the United States responded to 9/11 not with a criminal investigation but by launching two open-ended wars. Similar to his argument in his “last lecture” (also in 2006), LaFeber focused on the way that echoes of Woodrow Wilson returned with a vengeance, as President George W. Bush—who had denounced “nation building” in his presidential campaign just a year earlier—immediately sought to export democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq. For a careful student of US foreign policy, none of this was surprising, even though it was also deeply shocking to live through. “The September 11 attacks were,” as LaFeber put it, “the children of [the] Cold War.” It was appropriate, then, that he brought back Reinhold Niebuhr once again, this time to criticize George W. Bush’s breathtakingly ahistorical statement in a speech at West Point in mid-2002: “Moral truth,” Bush said, “is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place... we are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.”⁶³ For a realist critic of US foreign policy like LaFeber, there could hardly be a more alarming articulation of the US approach to the world.

For over four decades, LaFeber urgently pleaded with the American public and its representatives in government (including those who passed through his classes at Cornell) to grapple with the deep history of US foreign policy in an honest and comprehensive way. Unlike his mentor William Appleman Williams, he did not argue for dismantling the US empire; he did, however, want the United States to stop exhibiting the blindness of a traditional imperialist power and to reckon with its own beliefs and practices. Whether it is possible to accomplish the latter without the former was not a question that LaFeber addressed in his written work, although he gave us much to consider as we continue to grapple with that problem today.⁶⁴

In the end, his critique of US foreign policy did not track easily on a left-right spectrum. While his analysis would probably never be welcome among a certain strain of flag-waving nationalism, most often found on the right, it was also undeniably true that liberals proved just as capable as conservatives of the deadly combination of arrogance and ignorance that he consistently railed against. In fact, if there was a US foreign policy doctrine during his lifetime that LaFeber could have gotten behind, it was probably President Barack Obama’s amusingly crude liberal-realist credo, “don’t do stupid shit.”⁶⁵ But, as LaFeber could have told Obama had he asked, the history of US foreign policy suggests that is easier said than done—and even a Harvard education in constitutional law might not be enough to prevent you from falling into the footsteps of

⁶¹ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, New and Expanded Ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 165-166, 172.

⁶² LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, New and Expanded Ed., 184-185.

⁶³ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 10th ed., 429-430, 405, 419.

⁶⁴ As discussed earlier, there was something of a contradiction between LaFeber’s tendency to valorize certain imperialists and, arguably, at times, the empire itself, while simultaneously condemning the violence and excess engendered by an imperialistic mindset.

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

imperialists past. Of course, if we're being honest, neither was sitting through Walter LaFeber's foreign policy lectures at Cornell. For his goal was not to teach his students what to think, but rather what to think about. What any of us do with that information is still up to us.

 ESSAY BY ANDREW ROTTER, COLGATE UNIVERSITY

“Walter LaFeber and the Beckonings of Culture”

Walter LaFeber was my undergraduate advisor at Cornell, which I attended from 1971 to 1975. Soon after I settled at Colgate University in 1988, we became friends—though it took me some time to get over my awe of him and allow myself to regard him in some measure as a colleague, and to call him Walt. (I suspect the difficulty of making this transition is common. I’m no Walt LaFeber, but even my former students have trouble years later using my first name.) Ithaca and Hamilton are close enough that my wife and I were able to visit Walt, and his wife Sandy, several times a year, often spending hours over lunch at their home that backed onto Fall Creek Gorge. No subject was off limits, and our conversations ranged widely, guided mostly by Walt’s questions of us: What were we working on? (My wife is an art historian.) Were politics shaping Colgate as they were Cornell? If it was summer, had we seen the productions in repertory at Glimmerglass Opera yet, and if so what did we think? If my wife wasn’t there, or was talking privately to Sandy, Walt would ask me for news or gossip from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), which he had served as president. There was some sports talk, discussion of mutual acquaintances, and some catching me up with news of his Cornell friends and colleagues—Joel Silbey, Richard Polenberg, Mary Beth Norton, Glen Altschuler, Michael Kammen—some of whom had been my teachers. We once went to a Cornell-Brown men’s lacrosse game. What started as a warm spring day suddenly turned rainy and cold, but when I suggested we leave he insisted on staying until the end, by which time I, at least, was thoroughly soaked and miserable. He was good enough not to remind me of it ever again.

The question I wish to consider in this essay is a selfish one. It concerns my shift as a historian, from the foreign relations Revisionist that I learned to be from Walt (and my graduate advisor, Barton Bernstein), to a rider on what has been called “the cultural turn” in the field, including, in my case anyway, the entire shambolic collection of analytical categories including race, gender, religion, ritual, gesture, language, emotion, and the body. The turn in all of its forms, even just one category at a time, brought a sharp reaction from many in the field—especially from those who considered themselves some type of Revisionist. The journal *Diplomatic History* published both early work on the cultural turn and the critical response it summoned. In 1994, following essays by Laura McEnaney and Emily Rosenberg that explored the role of gender in US foreign relations, Bruce Kuklick, a self-described “Intransigent Revisionist,” offered a dismissive commentary. “In the 1960s,” he wrote, “I learned my diplomatic history by sitting (literally) at the feet of Gabriel Kolko and reading the work of William Appleman Williams.” With respect, McEnaney and Rosenberg were peddling “intellectual junk, the mental equivalent to eating at McDonald’s.” “Cultural studies needs to do serious research to be more than a trick,” Kuklick concluded.¹²⁵

A year later, the journal carried the address Melvyn Leffler had given as president of SHAFR. More circumspect than Kuklick, Leffler nevertheless cautioned against fashionable theorizing that had, in his telling, replaced the analysis of cause and effect with discourse. “The new stress on culture, gender, and language,” Leffler wrote, “should be understood, at least in part, as a repudiation of older categories of analysis that dealt with society, economy, and politics; with class, property, and income; with social structure and human

¹²⁵ Bruce Kuklick, “Confessions of an Intransigent Revisionist About Cultural Studies,” *Diplomatic History*, 18, 1 (Winter 1994): 121-124. Quotations on 121, 122, 123.

motivation”—matters with which Revisionists had been properly concerned.¹²⁶ The most wounded criticism came from Robert Buzzanco, who commented on a piece I had written on the role played by religion in US-India relations after 1947.¹²⁷ Categories of analysis such as gender and religion were, Buzzanco argued, fuzzy, unmeasurable, and above all politically vacant. Such categories mattered far less than “trade and investment statistics, income levels, military aid amounts, strategic alliances, or battlefield results.” “Without provoking an internecine fight among those of us who are critics of US foreign policy, or starting an intellectual pie fight over the legacy of William Appleman Williams,” he wrote, “it is still the sine qua non of Left diplomatic history that material factors be emphasized.”¹²⁸

The bitterness of the attacks seemed to me to come not just from honest intellectual disagreement, but from a sense of betrayal fostered by the seeming heresy of those who had themselves been Revisionists, fellow critics of American imperial overreach and citers of Marx and Williams. The exhilarating naughtiness of leftist criticism of US foreign policy and its intellectual defenders was now made to appear somehow *passé*. Their abandonment by the Culturalists, the embrace of Max Weber over Marx, threatened to deprive Revisionists of their previous claims to radicalism and freshness; those who now took up the analysis of race and gender had apparently outflanked them, and seemed to have won the admiration of younger historians whose attentions the Revisionists had always assumed would be theirs. I do not mean to imply that this interpretation was unfair. Nor would I suggest that the departure of the Culturalists—though perhaps “elaboration” is the better word here—was undertaken out of disillusionment with Revisionism or a mischievous desire for popularity among the cool kids who wrote about culture. Perspectives change, even critical ones.

I think Walt LaFeber knew that. I know that he read my early work, which captured my transition from Revisionism to Culturalism. He had supervised my undergraduate thesis on the US involvement in Vietnam 1945-1949, later to become, in expanded form (that is, featuring evidence), my dissertation “The Big Canvas,” and my first book, *The Path to Vietnam*.¹²⁹ My apostasy became apparent in a few articles and essays I published in the 1990s, predicting the book *Comrades at Odds*.¹³⁰ In these publications I gave full voice to culture as an essential approach to understanding US relations, especially with a nation about which the chasm of American ignorance had been filled mostly by prejudices and stereotypes based on perceptions of who Indians were. The book featured chapters on the differences between American and Indian understandings of space, mutual misapprehensions having to do with maturity (youthful America, hoary old India), gender (swaggering American men, timid, effeminate Hindus), race and caste (the pernicious hierarchies fashioned by nineteenth-century pseudoscience; the overweening arrogance of Anglo-Saxons and Brahmins), religion (the confident certainties of monotheism versus the multiple paths to truth allowed by Hinduism), and so on. References to Marx, Gabriel Kolko, and Williams (William Appleman) were largely replaced by those to Weber, Clifford Geertz, and Williams (Raymond). I had apparently abandoned Revisionism.

¹²⁶ Melvyn P. Leffler, “New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations,” *Diplomatic History*, 19, 2 (Spring 1995): 173-196. Quotation on 180.

¹²⁷ Andrew J. Rotter, “Christians, Muslims, and Hindus: Religion and US-South Asian Relations, 1947-1954,” *Diplomatic History*, 24, 4 (Fall 2000), 593-613

¹²⁸ Robert Buzzanco, “Where’s the Beef? Culture without Power in the Study of US Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History*, 24, 4 (Fall 2000), 623–632. Quotations on 630, 631.

¹²⁹ Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹³⁰ Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

Walt blurb-ed the book. I don't recall who suggested that we approach him, but I cannot imagine it was me; I was very worried about what he would think. I need not have been. He was more than generous, calling the book "a *tour de force*" and praising its "wide-ranging research and perspective." In subsequent conversations, he showed a staggering recollection of my arguments and evidence and genuine curiosity about how I had come to think as I had. He might have kidded me gently about my conversion, but I honestly don't remember. (If he were still with us, I'd ask him; he had an astonishing memory.) He was gracious, complimentary, and even, I think, proud.

I was hardly the only apostate he treated this way. Walt was fascinated by the work of his former graduate student, Frank Costigliola. From the beginning, Frank had been interested in cultural transmission, as indicated in his first book *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933*.¹³¹ Over time, and with more acuity than anyone else, Frank navigated the cultural turn, with a series of stunning pieces, published in the best journals, that explored the use of post-modern theory, language, gender, and especially the emotions as they applied to the study of US foreign relations. Walt and I talked at length about Frank's stemwinding article "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," and about Frank's award-winning book *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances*.¹³² He looked forward to the publication of Frank's biography of Kennan. He may have had disagreements with Frank's approach, but he never offered anything but praise for it in my hearing. And, while Walt was one the nicest people I have ever known, he was also one of the most honest. He would have said something if he felt the need to say it.

I know of two cases in which Walt credited the work of prominent culturalists who were not his students. When Penny Von Eschen arrived at Cornell in part to teach Walt's former foreign relations courses after he had retired, Walt made it a point to read her work. He told me he was very impressed, especially with what was then her latest book: *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*.¹³³ Kristin L. Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American War* examined the same history that Walt had confronted years earlier in his *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*.¹³⁴ As the titles of the books suggest, her conclusions were altogether different from his. Yet there was his blurb on the back cover: "Kristin Hoganson's important book is a pioneering, imaginative, and provocative analysis" of the reasons the United States had gone to war in 1898. It "cannot be ignored—in part because of a spirited debate over its innovative approach."

I get it about blurbs: nobody writes a bad one. Walt's blurbs of my book and Hoganson's might have been written out of a sense of duty or politeness. My "wide-ranging... perspective" and Hoganson's "innovative approach" could have been code for "reckless free-thinking" and "wild speculation." But I don't think Walt would have agreed to blurb these books if he didn't see something of value in them. He didn't insist that you

¹³¹ Frank C. Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹³² Costigliola, "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *Journal of American History*, 83, 4 (March 1997), 1309-1339; Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹³³ Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹³⁴ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

agree with him. He demanded that you do your research, think carefully, and recognize that historical scholarship was serious business.¹³⁵

One reason why I think that Walt was open to culture-based interpretations of US diplomacy was his own experience of Revisionism. We are mistaken if we equate Revisionism with economic determinism, or even materialism. It wasn't for Walt, and it wasn't for Fred Harvey Harrington, Walt's most influential graduate teacher, or for William Appleman Williams either. Influenced by Charles Beard, all of them emphasized the domestic sources of US foreign relations, and many of these were economic. But not wholly. All three historians took ideas seriously, and all placed economic issues within the considerably more expansive category of ideology, or what Williams insisted on calling "*Weltanschauung*."¹³⁶ LaFeber wrote of Harrington's "willingness to break intellectual molds, to think the unconventional, to question the unaccepted." "In Harrington's intellectual house," he concluded, "there were, therefore, many rooms"—though (he added), "most of the furniture was modern Progressive."¹³⁷

Or take this passage from Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, concerning the period 1900-1939: "Throughout these... years, the rise of a new crusading spirit in American diplomacy contributed an outward thrust of its own and reinforced the secular expansion. This righteous enthusiasm was both secular, emphasizing political and social ideology, and religious, stressing the virtues (and necessities) of Protestant Christianity."¹³⁸ No mention there of economics at all, and religion appears as an explanatory factor of high importance.¹³⁹

Readers unfamiliar with Walt's volume in the *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* might be surprised to find in its index multiple entries under "racism," involving 27 of the book's 239 pages.¹⁴⁰ I do think that Walt was impatient with the excesses of post-structuralism, insofar as they afflicted the subfield. But as a matter of fact they never got very far; foreign relations Culturalism was not necessarily a direct descendent of the post-structuralist concern for discourse, uninterested in cause and effect. Revisionism, in short, was a more capacious approach than most of its critics understood. The cultural approach, for its part and in many of its manifestations, remained tethered to the traditional pursuits of history.

The students trained by Walt LaFeber, both undergraduates and graduate students, ended up all over the place, politically and professionally. Some nestled into teaching jobs in the academy. Others found their way to policy circles. Many went into business, many (more, probably) into law. Walt stayed in touch with scores of them, hosting them for lunches or overnight. Needless to say, not all of them were, or remained, leftist critics of US foreign policy. Some of them joined the Foreign Service; some worked for administrations of

¹³⁵ I may, of course, be wrong about this.

¹³⁶ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, revised edit. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962).

¹³⁷ Walter LaFeber, "Fred Harvey Harrington, Teacher and Friend: An Appreciation," in Thomas J. McCormick and LaFeber, eds., *Behind the Throne: Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents, 1898-1968* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 3, 7.

¹³⁸ Williams, *Tragedy*, 53.

¹³⁹ Williams is also cited frequently by the luminaries of Cultural Studies, including Edward Said and Amy Kaplan. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5, 55, 64; Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3-21.

¹⁴⁰ LaFeber, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Volume III: The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

which Walt disapproved. To my knowledge, no one reported being snubbed by him. I suspect that Walt agreed with Williams, who bridled when others spoke of his students as his “disciples.” Not so, wrote Williams: he and the students were “a *community*... committed to the proposition that History is the most consequential way of learning who we are and what we should do.... All are teachers and all are students.”¹⁴¹ All had the agency, and the smarts, to find their own way.

Walt believed that the study of US foreign relations was intrinsically important. At the core of his scholarship and teaching was the belief that the United States had imperial origins, and that it had, by 1945, risen to place of global preeminence with consequences that demanded close and critical attention. Forty years ago, Charles S. Maier famously chastised US diplomatic historians for (among other things) having narrowed their concerns to the United States and American archives. Walt responded that, given the power of the United States, this was neither surprising nor wrong. Indeed, he wrote, the focus on the United States “is how it should be. The United States is the only nation in the twentieth century that continually exercises power globally while maintaining a liberal system at home.”¹⁴² Follow the money, follow the power, and you find yourself at the National Archives in Washington.

Walt’s response surely indicated his true feelings. It did not mean, however, that his work began and ended with the United States. Each time he started a new post-dissertation project—studies of the Cold War (*America, Russia, and the Cold War*, published first in 1967 and ultimately in ten editions), US relations with Central America (*The Panama Canal and Inevitable Revolutions*), and US relations with Japan (*The Clash*), Walt visited the countries, or most of the countries, he was preparing to discuss.¹⁴³ There is sparse evidence of these visits in the books themselves; the reasons, I think, are that Walt didn’t often visit archives in other countries, and that he wished to protect those who may have talked with him and whose safety might be compromised should their cooperation be revealed (Central America). The Preface to *The Panama Canal* mentions that he travelled to Panama in 1976 with Prof. Thomas Holloway, who had translated for the US Army during riots in the Canal Zone twelve years earlier. *The Clash* acknowledges help from a number of Japanese scholars based in Japan. Walt’s family has confirmed that he several times visited the Soviet Union/Russia and Eastern Europe, and that prior to writing *Inevitable Revolutions* he flew into Managua and was incommunicado for days. The United States was the center of postwar power, yes. But how other nations responded to that power mattered a great deal to Walt, and he felt it important to see those places for himself, and to hear from the people who lived in them.¹⁴⁴

Walter LaFeber was a brilliant scholar of the history of US foreign relations. That was also the subject he taught at Cornell, a big place where specialization is encouraged. But Walt was interested in many things,

¹⁴¹ Williams, “To the Editors,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 18, 1972.

¹⁴² Charles S. Maier, “Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations,” in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 355-387; Responses to Charles S. Maier, “Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 1981), 353-382. Quotation on 363.

¹⁴³ LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th edit. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006); LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983); LaFeber, *The Clash: US-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

¹⁴⁴ Information about Walt’s travels emerged during a conversation held in Storrs, CT, on September 25, 2021, with family members (Sandra, Scott, and Suzanne LaFeber) and some of Walt’s former students, colleagues, and friends: Frank Costigliola, Jeffrey Engel, Lloyd Gardner, Nancy Gardner, Robert Hanigan, Richard Immerman, David Langbart, Douglas Little, and Andrew Rotter.

scholarly, pedagogical, and otherwise. By “otherwise” I mean, broadly speaking, culture. He liked sports: he was an excellent high school basketball player, followed Notre Dame football and the mostly lost-cause Chicago Cubs, and was willing to sit through a college lacrosse game on an ugly day. He wrote *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, which included more than a little basketball.¹⁴⁵ He and Sandy were museum-goers. He loved theater and opera, and he remembered shows they had seen years earlier, including their stars. Was he a would-be actor? There was surely something performative about his lectures, delivered without notes (as Fred Harvey Harrington had done) while he paced the stage or sat on a table and gestured with his large hands.

He was always modest, but giving a valedictory lecture before an audience of hundreds at New York’s Beacon Theater in 2006 must have been a thrill. In the edited volume *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire*, Walt included a letter from Adams to his wife, Louisa, in which Adams explained to her why he liked to attend the theater: first, “the tickets cost me nothing,” and, second, “the stage has been to me a source of amusement for more than forty years.”¹⁴⁶ That sounds more than a bit like Walt, who admired John Quincy for many reasons. Walt also developed an expertise in Finger Lakes white wine, served with pride and a generous hand with lunches in Ithaca.

I am suggesting here that Walt LaFeber’s willingness to consider the cultural analysis of US foreign relations came in part from his recognition of the importance of culture in his own life and the lives of others. It is possible, I suppose, that there exists a kind of blood-brain barrier between one’s intellectual projects and one’s recreational pursuits. Male academics especially have in the past been encouraged to think like this. Many of us believe we know better. Emotion cannot be walled off from intellect; the body is a demanding thing, and the brain is never the full measure of the self. This is true for those of us who write history and those whom we study. We cannot always account for the reasons why people act as they do, for most people have a hard time explaining this to themselves and to those they correspond with. All of us rely on perceptions of others to make judgments about them. We weigh their gestures and expressions, parse their language with care, observe the webs of their behaviors and rituals and art through the webs of our own. We are the captives of our senses.

I would not call Walt LaFeber a foreign relations culturalist. Reviewing *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* for the *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt took Walt to task for neglecting to consider why Jordan’s image appealed to so many around the world. “The author barely mentions perhaps the most striking feature about Jordan, not his airiness, but instead that he’s hairless,” Lehmann-Haupt sniffed.¹⁴⁷ Fine: a cultural historian would have devoted at least a chapter to Jordan’s appearance, perhaps down to his fingernails. Walt had a more important purpose in writing the book. Yet, he did include in it the story of Jordan crying publicly when he won his first championship in 1991, and quoted Jordan’s apology to reporters: “I never showed this kind of emotion before in public.” Sam Smith of the *Chicago Tribune* responded: “He really is human after all.”¹⁴⁸ Walt LaFeber always knew that his subjects, all of them, were human after all.

¹⁴⁵ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁴⁶ John Quincy Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, August 28, 1822, in Walter LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 29-30.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, review of Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, *New York Times*, July 15, 1999.

¹⁴⁸ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan*, 78.