Thinking Otherwise

> History has to be re-written by each generation. Even if the facts are the same, the slant on the facts will be different.
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> *Cornell historian Carl Becker (1917-41) answering the question: What is the good of history?*[1]
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> A professor is someone who thinks otherwise.
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> *Walter LaFeber praising Carl Becker*[2]

Walter LaFeber, one of America's most distinguished historians, wowed generations of Cornellians from the moment he arrived in Ithaca in 1959 through his death in March 2021. He was a legendary and revered teacher whose lectures on the history of US foreign policy drew hundreds of students every semester during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. He was a prize-winning scholar whose insightful accounts of US relations with Russia (and the Soviet Union), Central America, and Japan and best-selling textbook, *The American Age*, became "must-reads" in history courses across the country and around the globe. He was a devoted mentor to dozens of undergraduate and graduate students who pursued careers in college teaching, US government service, the law, the fine arts, philanthropy, and business and industry. And perhaps most important, in his lectures, in his books, and in his dealings with the contributors to this volume, he made a habit of thinking otherwise.

On a sun-dappled Saturday afternoon in September 2021, eight of us converged on Frank Costigliola's house nestled in the Connecticut woods to reminisce and celebrate Walt's life. Out of that informal gathering came plans for a volume honoring him. The idea had emerged in the wake of a glowing tribute that had taken place at a meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) a few months earlier. Walt's wife Sandy, his daughter Suzanne, and his son Scott also drove down from Boston for the day. Over white wine and craft beer, we shared our favorite stories about Walt, both personal and professional, and reached

consensus on several things. He was the greatest teacher and wisest mentor that anyone present had ever encountered. His days must have lasted more than twenty-four hours for him to have written so many iconic books and articles while still managing to stay in touch with students, friends, and colleagues. He loved dogs but hated cats. Although he often lost faith in the Chicago Cubs, he never lost his love for them. And if Walt were to learn that a project such as this was in the works, he surely would have asked: "Don't you all have something more productive to do with your time?"

At a literal farm-to-table dinner that night and brunch the following morning, this self-styled "LaFeber posse"—five former undergraduates, two former PhD students, and a lifelong friend—came up with an idea for an unconventional tribute designed to showcase not their own research but rather Walt's scholarly work and his profound impact on the profession. The LaFeber posse would eventually double in size (evenly split between undergraduate and graduate alums who spanned some four decades of study with Walt at Cornell) and begin meeting regularly over Zoom to plan the collection of chapters that follows. Over Halloween weekend in October 2022, the Cornell Department of History, with notable support from Andrew Tisch, David Maisel, and the LaFeber family, hosted a workshop in Ithaca that brought the entire posse together for the first time in the flesh. It was an experience unlike any academic gathering any of the posse members could remember. After a presentation of each chapter, there was a free-wheeling discussion about how best to ensure that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Posse members criticized and complimented one another. They told stories. Mostly strangers previously, they bonded over Walt.

What has emerged is a tribute divided into two sections. The first profiles "Walt the person" by charting his career at Cornell, by recalling his formative years in graduate school, and

by showing how he literally made his way into the archival records, where he did so much scholarly research. The second celebrates "LaFeber the great historian" and demonstrates his enduring influence on the field of US diplomatic history by linking six of his monographs and related writings to his abiding concern about the fate of the American experiment from the 18th century to the present. Neither biography, nor historiography, nor hagiography, this volume is a testament to a teacher-scholar who managed to inspire thousands of students and publish more than a dozen books while still finding time to attend baseball games, even when his beloved Cubs were not playing, and catch Tony Award-winning performances on Broadway.

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Walter LaFeber arrived at Cornell University a few weeks shy of his 26th birthday and would spend his entire career teaching there. It was an Ivy League school but also a land-grant institution, a place that combined the intimacy of tiny Hanover College, where Walt had earned his BA, and the high-powered research environment of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he had earned his PhD. Ithaca, New York, the city Walt came to call home, had a population of just under 30,000 in August 1959, twenty times the size of Walkerton, Indiana, where he had grown up, but much smaller than Boston or New Haven. In short, Cornell was a perfect fit and Ithaca was a perfect setting for a rising academic star who, as David Green and Douglas Little confirm in Chapter One, "Remembering Walt," soon became the archetypal teacher-scholar on campus.

During the late 1950s, Cornell could already boast a cadre of world-famous faculty like Hans Bethe in Physics, Clinton Rossiter in Government, and Vladimir Nabokov in Comparative Literature, who set a high standard for engaged teaching. In no time at all, Walt would join their ranks, thanks mainly to his two-semester lecture course on American foreign policy but also to

his seminars on Cold War diplomacy, and, occasionally, to his rendition of the US survey pitched to first-year students. The secret to his success in the classroom was not very complicated. Walt kept his lectures focused on the forest rather than the trees, he never wavered in challenging and setting high expectations for his students, and he radiated a kindness and a humility that made him extraordinarily approachable.

Undergraduates and PhD students were not the only Cornellians enthralled by Walt LaFeber. As early as the mid-1960s, faculty colleagues across campus admired his leadership and respected his commitment to principle. From the 1970s through the 1990s and beyond, deans, provosts, and presidents sought his counsel, and trustees were astonished by his commitment to the university. Yet although Walt was hopelessly devoted to Cornell, he remained, first and foremost, a historian who had no interest whatsoever in becoming an administrator, as he once made very clear with his trademark sense of humor. "When Dale Corson became President in 1969, . . . I told someone I thought so highly of Dale that I'd help collect the garbage at Cornell if he asked me," Walt recalled long afterward. "Several years later, Dale asked me to be Dean of the Arts College. I immediately said no." Then came the punchline: "He said he had heard I'd collect garbage for him. I said that yes I would, but I would not be Dean."[3]

In Chapter Two, "The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist," Lloyd Gardner and Thomas McCormick reveal how Walt LaFeber came to be that historian. After earning his MA at Stanford, he entered the PhD program at the University of Wisconsin, then, as now, a hotbed of progressivism in a state where the ghost of Robert ("Fighting Bob") LaFollette shadow-boxed with the country's leading right-wing demagogue, Joseph ("Tail Gunner Joe") McCarthy. Madison, the state capital, was riven by a town and gown divide, with many locals convinced

that graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, and the professors who taught them, were at best parlor pinks and at worst card-carrying communists. The reality, however, was a bit different. After all, this was the Midwest in the 1950s. Like Gardner and McCormick, his good friends from his renowned graduate student cohort, Walt was a disenchanted member of the "Silent Generation" who liked to sip lime Cokes at Rennebohm's drugstore in the afternoon. But often in the evenings, all three of them would eagerly attend bull sessions hosted by William Appleman Williams, where they traded ideas with him and other young UW faculty.

Walt came to challenge Cold War orthodoxy while writing a dissertation on the roots of US expansion in the 19th century and discovering how, as another historian would put it several decades later, America had managed to hide an empire.[4] To be sure, Bill Williams and Walt's (and Bill's) mentor, Fred Harvey Harrington, always asked: Where's the economics? But the "Wisconsin School revisionists" took their cues from Charles A. Beard, not Karl Marx, and those who later claimed that Walt and his comrades were "economic determinists" or, even worse, apologists for the Kremlin, either misunderstood or misrepresented the nature of their critique of American foreign policy. Rather than endorsing Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's attacks on US imperialism, Walt LaFeber shared President Dwight Eisenhower's fear that the exigencies of the Cold War abroad were putting democracy at risk at home. "We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex," Ike warned in a Farewell Address to the American people not long after Walt left Madison for Ithaca. "The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."[5] Two decades later, Walt would describe his place on the political spectrum succinctly. "I'm hardly a radical revisionist, as people who are (and are also good friends, such as Lloyd Gardner) keep reminding me," he told one of the contributors to this volume in September 1980.

"It is difficult to hold a chair at Cornell and be a radical—at least some times. On the other hand, I'm not about to go into a monastery to prove a point."[6]

As David Langbart makes clear in Chapter Three, "Finding Walter LaFeber in the Archives," few historians at Cornell or anywhere else have been more committed to archival research or as determined to promote preservation of records and scholarly access to classified material than Walt LaFeber. His books utilize a broad array of US documentary sources ranging from the Library of Congress and the National Archives to presidential libraries and state historical societies. He recognized the importance of multi-archival research, frequently visiting the British Public Record Office and utilizing Latin American, Russian, and Japanese documents in translation. And as chair of the State Department's Historical Advisory Committee during Nixon and Ford administrations, Walt was a persistent though not always successful advocate for more rapid declassification of government secrets that were essential for the accuracy of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series.

The archives reveal that not long after the fall of Saigon, the United States Information Agency invited Walt to deliver a series of lectures in the Far East. In late 1975, he visited universities in Singapore, Japan, and Thailand, where he recapped the history of the US emergence as a Pacific power and ruminated on the likely fallout from the debacle in Vietnam. Walt's candid appraisal of America's predicament in Asia reflected a sincere, but critical, patriotism. This was consistent with the values he embraced during graduate school at Wisconsin and throughout his career at Cornell: the resolve necessary to make the past come alive in the lecture hall; faith that scholarly integrity would set the historical record straight; a belief in the importance of an educated citizenry; and the hope that, under the right circumstances, US policymakers might learn from their mistakes.

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The final six chapters of this volume highlight our second goal, to address Walter LaFeber's wide-ranging contributions to the field of diplomatic history and the broader public conversation about American foreign policy. His scholarship has had a profound impact on our understanding of the history of US foreign relations. Some of his writings became master narratives for the important matters he explored while others nudged the field in new directions. Examined collectively, the second part of the volume reveals the common denominators of LaFeber's scholarship: the implication of the admonition to "extend the sphere," the synergies between domestic dynamics and foreign imperatives, and the interplay of structural forces and individual agency. At the same time, the chapters reveal LaFeber's remarkable range. His monographs spanned geography and chronology, addressing economics, race, political culture, and technological advances, sometimes alone but often in combination.

These chapters can be read separately, but they are best understood together. By focusing on six of LaFeber's most important books and linking them to contemporary issues, we, the contributors to this volume, examine the broad spectrum of his concerns, his arguments, and his enduring influence. These considerations, in turn, have led us to expand and extrapolate from what we have learned. Put differently, LaFeber's writings have provoked us to think otherwise.

Like most freshly-minted historians, Walter LaFeber revised and expanded his dissertation into his first book. And as readers of Susan Brewer's and Robert Hannigan's Chapter Four, "Extending the Sphere," will discover (if they do not already know), oh what a book it was. In *The New Empire*, LaFeber outlined the intellectual, strategic, and economic underpinnings of an outward thrust that culminated in war with Spain in 1898 and America's emergence as a great power. He showed that far from being an aberration, the US acquisition of

colonies in the Caribbean and the Far East during the late 1890s signaled the transition from continental to transoceanic expansion, a compelling new interpretive framework that earned him the American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Prize in 1963.

In his lectures and in his writings on the antebellum period, LaFeber traced this expansionist impulse back several generations to James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," who argued in the 1780s that the most effective solution to the political challenges facing the new republic was to "extend the sphere." Then LaFeber turned the spotlight on his hero, John Quincy Adams, who as secretary of state in 1823 persuaded the president he served to promulgate the Monroe Doctrine, a geopolitical blueprint for a rising American empire that would take on increasingly theological overtones from the 1890s to the 1940s and beyond. "I've not been able to discover how doctrine became a term in US foreign policy, but it is clear that it has an overweight religious component that makes it central to understanding US foreign policy—and why Americans support it," LaFeber confessed four decades after the publication of *The New Empire*. "It began when doctrine first appeared during the 2nd Great Awakening and took off from there—until now, every President has to be certified American by having a doctrine."[7]

Having reframed the traditional narrative of the US collision with Spain during the 1890s, LaFeber turned his attention to the US collision with the Soviet Union on Harry Truman's watch. Chapter Five, "Reconstructing the Back Story," by Frank Costigliola and Jeffrey Engel, not only reveals how LaFeber came to write *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, his most widely-read book, but also uncovers the evolution of a great historian's thinking in response to the shifting relationship and intensifying rivalry between the superpowers. Juggling the relativism of Carl Becker, the realism of George Kennan, and the revisionism of his mentors at Wisconsin, LaFeber

sought to solve a riddle posed by Reinhold Niebuhr: Was the Cold War a Greek tragedy of inevitability or a Christian tragedy of possibility? Through ten editions, he would spend forty years refining his answer, adding new research, while preserving a crisp, concise analysis of the evolving Soviet-American rivalry that would be read by thousands and thousands of students. Dismissing those who framed the Cold War as "a long peace" that never saw America and Russia fire shots in anger at each other, he emphasized the terrible human costs that the superpowers inflicted on ordinary men and women after the Cold War spilled over into Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.[8]

A year after the sixth edition of *America, Russia, and the Cold War* appeared in 1988, LaFeber reiterated that both Washington and Moscow had a responsibility to end the decades-old conflict peacefully. "I cared less about who was the good and who was the bad guy," he explained, and was "much more interested in pointing out how both the Soviet and US systems, not just the Soviet, had their backs against the wall by the mid-1980s and had to make some compromises in the Cold War to survive intact, or relatively intact."[9]

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev and the soft landing at the end of the Cold War would have surprised Niebuhr, and LaFeber gave George H. W. Bush high marks in 1989 for not dancing on the Berlin Wall. Yet the next three decades would bring a series of missed opportunities that seemed to confirm that, even after the fall of communism, conflict between America and Russia would remain a chronic condition. The 1990s brought neither "the end of history" nor a massive "peace dividend." Rather, emerging from the post-Cold War decade were failed states from Somalia to Haiti, the sudden collapse of the Kremlin's empire, and the rise of Islamic extremism, problems that could not be solved by relying on military alliances, covert operations, economic leverage, or other gadgets in America's Cold War tool kit. By the early

21st century, LaFeber feared that a new cold war with Russia was inevitable, not only because of Vladimir Putin's determination to reverse what the Russian autocrat saw as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century—the demise of the Soviet Union—but also because of US arrogance and ignorance in expanding the NATO military alliance into former Soviet domains.

Readers of Chapter Six, "Thinking about Democracy," will not be surprised to learn from Lorena Oropeza and James Siekmeier that inevitability was also the central theme of LaFeber's most controversial book. *Inevitable Revolutions* was published in 1983, just as Washington was escalating its not-so-secret covert war against left-wing insurgents in Central America, whom the Reagan administration claimed were Cuban-inspired and Soviet-controlled. Vigorously rejecting that claim, LaFeber argued that the turmoil in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and their neighbors was merely the latest episode in America's centuries-old quest for hegemony over its Latin neighbors. Driven by security concerns in the Caribbean, economic interests from Guatemala to Chile, and reflexive anticommunism, US policies and actions had produced not democracy but "neo-dependency," a brutal and exploitative system that would cost thousands of lives in Central America during the 1980s.

In many ways, *Inevitable Revolutions* was a bookend to the story LaFeber had begun to tell in *The New Empire*. Race figured much more prominently in his analysis of the 1980s than in his account of the 1890s, something that reflected a field in transition, with diplomatic historians focusing less on the white men who controlled US foreign policy and more on the people of color who were on the receiving end of American hegemony. Because *Inevitable Revolutions* sold well and was widely adopted for classroom use, LaFeber became a lightning rod for supporters of Reagan's anticommunist crusade in Central America, transforming him briefly into an embattled public intellectual, a role in which he was never comfortable. His

abiding faith in democracy, however, never wavered, notwithstanding right-wing critics erroneously branding him a Marxist.

Even as he was chronicling the carnage in Central America, LaFeber was "Turning to Asia," where, as Anne Foster and Andrew Rotter highlight in Chapter Seven, he prophesied that deepening rivalries across the Pacific would preoccupy US policymakers well into the new millennium. *The Clash*, which won the 1998 Bancroft Prize, is much more than an overview of US relations with Japan from the 1850s through the 1990s. As with his past work, LaFeber adopted a state-centered approach, but he examined tensions between Washington and Tokyo through a transnational lens and utilized many Japanese-language sources to tell his story from both ends of the telescope. The book also reflects an acute sense of place, with the geographic distance between LaFeber's native Midwest and the Far East shrinking geopolitically, like objects in a sideview mirror that are actually closer than they appear.

Once again, race figured prominently in *The Clash*, not only in LaFeber's analysis of the xenophobic mutual demonization that led the United States and Japan to engage in a "war without mercy" during the 1940s, but also in his description of the striking differences in how the two countries approached economic matters during the 1970s and 1980s. With a bow to the cultural turn in diplomatic history, LaFeber argued that Japanese-style capitalism—hierarchical, government-directed, and oligopolistic—had deep roots in the island nation's past that ran counter to American practice and tradition, which featured the open door, a faith in the magic of the marketplace, and a ferocious individualism that had enabled 19th century statesmen to extend the sphere. At a time when the Clinton administration was preoccupied with crises in the Balkans and the Middle East, *The Clash* made a prescient case that, sooner rather than later, the United States would need to pivot to Asia.

In Chapter Eight, "Demystifying Globalization," Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu and Jessica Wang underscore LaFeber's abiding mistrust of centralized economic power; his lifelong enthusiasm for baseball, basketball, and other sports; and, hovering above both, his fondness for state-centered diplomatic history and his ambivalence about "the cultural turn." *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* could only have been written by a Wisconsin School Revisionist who grew up shooting hoops in high school, rooting for the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, and shuttling regularly between Walkerton and Wrigley Field. At the dawn of what LaFeber suspected would become the Asian Century, baseball had emerged as the national pastime in Japan, and "His Airness," by acclamation the greatest player in NBA history, was more popular in China than Mao Zedong.

Thanks to ESPN and other media giants, professional sports represented one of the most potent instruments of American "soft power" in the post-Cold War era, while US multinational corporations like Nike, Michael Jordan's sponsor, became force multipliers. Equally important. as LaFeber pointed out in his SHAFR presidential address in 1999, was America's innovative technology, which served as the third leg of this soft-power tripod during a short-lived "unipolar moment" after the Cold War, when policymakers in Washington struggled to prevent Japan from surpassing the United States economically and to prepare for China's emergence as a military superpower. Yet despite LaFeber's cogent critique of Nike, Microsoft, and the "Coca-colonization" of the world, his model failed to recognize the resilience of non-American folkways or the ability of local peoples around the world to forge new meanings from US cultural exports. Nevertheless, his warning that, by concentrating too much financial power in a handful of multinational conglomerates, globalization was more likely to bring corporate autocracy than universal prosperity, would ring true by the third decade of the 21st century.

Our last chapter, "Confronting the Tocqueville Problem," addresses Walter LaFeber's career-long preoccupation with the durability of the American experiment. Eric Alterman and Richard Immerman present his final book, *The Deadly Bet*, as a timeless but underappreciated political allegory featuring heroes and villains during the *annus horribilis* 1968. *The Deadly Bet* was published in 2005 at the very moment that the United States was sinking ever deeper into quicksand on the Euphrates as a result of a disastrous policy that evoked memories of an earlier quagmire on the Mekong. This succinct book is LaFeber's most explicit commentary on US racism, political opportunism, and other domestic pathologies. The teacher and citizen-scholar shared Alexis de Tocqueville's conviction that democracy was not compatible with empire, and he feared that the fallout from the 9/11 attacks might be worse than the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Donald Trump's four years in the White House heightened LaFeber's fears, and his preferred outcome in the 2020 election was never in doubt. "Biden can go to sleep after his inauguration and remain comatose until 2025," LaFeber quipped two months before voters went to the polls, and "he'll still be more constructive than Trump has been or ever will be."[10] He lived long enough to watch right-wing insurrectionists storm the US Capitol, a chilling reminder that Americans should not take anything for granted. LaFeber was always careful not to read too much into the lessons of the past, but he agreed with Mark Twain, who once said: "History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme."

The Deadly Bet evokes a series of questions about America's past and its future that were implicit in everything Walter LaFeber had ever written, beginning with *The New Empire*. What happens when "extending the sphere" is no longer an option, let alone a solution? Is the challenge posed by post-Cold War Russia any less dangerous than that posed by the Soviet

Union? Have Reagan's misguided policies in Central America created an unsolvable problem along the southern border, where thousands of refugees continue to flee political violence dating from the 1980s? Can the United States pivot to Asia without triggering another clash, this time not with Japan but with China? Can US policymakers find ways to harness neoliberal globalization fueled by technological innovation and prevent the free market mantra from triggering trade wars, financial instability, and an anti-American backlash? Will 2024 bring another *annus horribilis* far worse than the one in 1968? Is an empire for liberty an oxymoron?

Walter LaFeber has left it to us to provide the answers, and the fate of American democracy hangs in the balance. By paying homage to him and his scholarship, this volume explores these questions, even if it does not claim to answer them. Despite always thinking otherwise, LaFeber himself could not do that. But reading his books and revisiting his lectures requires us to ask.

Endnotes

[1] Becker to William Dodd, January 27, 1932, in Michael Kammen, ed., *What Is the Good of History? Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 156.

[2] LaFeber as quoted in Jenny Proctor, "One Role of a Professor is to 'Think Otherwise,' Says LaFeber," *Cornell Chronicle* (October 18, 2010): https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2010 /10/renowned-professor-talks-being-professor.

[3] LaFeber email to Douglas Little, May 9, 2002.

[4] Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2019).

[5] Eisenhower, "Address to the American People," January 17, 1961, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address.

[6] LaFeber to David Langbart, January 2, 1980.

[7] LaFeber email to Douglas Little, June 5, 2003.

[8] See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[9] LaFeber to Douglas Little, September 24, 1989.

[10] LaFeber email to Susan Brewer, August 2020.