Chapter One

Remembering Walt: From the Arts Quad to the Beacon Theater

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The vibe inside Broadway's Beacon Theater on April 25, 2006 felt like an opening night, but the evening actually marked the curtain call for Walter LaFeber's remarkable forty-seven-year run teaching United States diplomatic history far above Cayuga's waters.[1] The setting was familiar to anyone who had heard Walt lecture over the years—a table, a podium, and a blackboard with a brief outline chalked in his distinctive scrawl. Over 2500 friends, colleagues, and former students had gathered in the Beacon (which looked like a jumbo version of Bailey Hall, the largest auditorium on the Cornell campus) to hear their favorite teacher's long goodbye, delivered as always without notes. Walt did not disappoint. Calling his valedictory lecture "Half a Century of Friends, Foreign Policy, and Great Losers," he provided a primer on the perils facing US policymakers early in the new millennium while prompting his listeners to reminisce about the moment that they had first crossed paths with the man who changed their lives.[2]

Walter LaFeber arrived on Cornell's Arts Quad with little fanfare in the autumn of 1959. He was a Midwesterner, unfailingly polite, unassuming, and a little aloof, a grocer's son who hailed from Walkerton, Indiana, a small town not far from South Bend. After graduating from tiny Hanover College thirty-five miles upstream from Louisville on the Hoosier side of the Ohio River, Walt headed west to Stanford for his MA before returning home to the heartland to complete his PhD at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He joined a Cornell history department in transition, a junior replacement for Dexter Perkins, a former president of the American Historical Association and the country's leading expert on the Monroe Doctrine.[3]

Before long, Walt held the Marie Underhill Noll endowed chair and was the leader of an all-star cast of US historians including Michael Kammen, Joel Silbey, Richard Polenberg, Mary Beth Norton, R. Laurence Moore, and Stuart Blumin that would make Cornell a top-ten place to undertake graduate study in American history by the early 1970s.[4]

Although Walt was fond of Dexter Perkins, he regarded himself as the intellectual heir of an equally distinguished historian, Carl Becker, who taught at Cornell from 1917 to 1941. Like Walt, Becker was a Midwesterner, born in Waterloo, Iowa, and also like Walt, Becker earned his PhD at the University of Wisconsin, where he studied with Frederick Jackson Turner, whose "frontier thesis" would be repurposed and applied to foreign policy by what came to be known as "the Wisconsin School" of diplomatic history. Becker's most gifted student at Cornell was Fred Harvey Harrington, who subsequently spent half a century at Wisconsin as history department chair, university president, and Walt's teacher, mentor, and role model. Becker had taught Harrington to question conventional wisdom and to explore the synergy between political and economic power, and Harrington in turn passed these lessons along to Walt. When Walt arrived in Ithaca fresh out of graduate school, he was completing an arc that Becker had begun to lay out on the Arts Quad a generation earlier. Through Harrington, Walt absorbed and enthusiastically embraced Becker's most important message about academic life: "A professor is someone who thinks otherwise."[5]

Thanks to Fred Harvey Harrington, "thinking otherwise" was in the intellectual DNA of all the historians he trained during the 1950s at the University of Wisconsin, where some swore they could hear Becker's ghost wandering through Bascom Hall. Lloyd Gardner and Thomas McCormick have captured the electric atmosphere that they and Walt experienced in graduate seminars and in the lectures of William Appleman Williams, then Harrington's most famous

protégé. All four were Midwesterners—Gardner and McCormick from Ohio, Williams from Iowa, and Walt from Indiana—who were skeptical of the East Coast foreign policy establishment and critical of the financial power wielded by Wall Street.[6] Self-styled "revisionists," they challenged anticommunist orthodoxy in Eisenhower's America. Yet unlike three of their equally controversial contemporaries—Eugene Genovese, Gabriel Kolko, and Howard Zinn—Walt and his Wisconsin School comrades were influenced more by Charles Beard than by Karl Marx. Walt saw himself as a social democrat and worried that "the loose, if not cynical, use of democracy to justify certain foreign policies" favored by US business interests was making democratic processes like free elections "meaningless and indeed dangerous."[7]

All of Walt's books, from *The New Empire* published in 1963 through *The Deadly Bet* more than forty years later, reflect the influence of Carl Becker, Charles Beard, and two other public intellectuals—Henry Adams and Reinhold Niebuhr. Walt was especially fond of Becker's answer to that perennial question: What is the good of history? "The facts may be determined with accuracy, but the 'interpretation' will always be shaped by the prejudices, biases, [and] needs of the individual and these in turn will depend on the age in which he lives," Becker had explained in 1932. "Hence history has to be re-written by each generation. Even if the facts are the same, the slant on the facts will be different."[8]

Walt had a particular soft spot in his heart for his fellow Hoosier and "friend of Becker," Charles Beard, whose *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* was an "ur-text" for most members of the Wisconsin School. Beard did not get everything right, of course, as when he implied that FDR had opened "the back door to war" by purposely exposing the US Pacific fleet to Japanese attack on December 7, 1941.[9] One of the few times that Walt ever grew visibly angry, however, was when he recalled the nasty screed written by Harvard's Samuel Eliot

Morison for the August 1948 issue of *The Atlantic* with the catchy subtitle "History through a Beard." One might question another historian's interpretation, but never his patriotism or his scholarly integrity.

A Harvard man whom Walt admired, on the other hand, was Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of presidents. Adams was a snob and a curmudgeon, but he was also a brilliant historian who conducted multi-archival research and thought systematically about America's past and its power. Some of Adams's writings, like his use of the laws of thermodynamics to explain civilizational decline, bordered on nonsense, and he had a huge axe to grind with Thomas Jefferson, whom he regarded as a demagogue and a usurper. Nevertheless, Walt was quick to point out that Henry Adams provided a prophetic warning for 20th-century US policymakers when he "pointedly spelled out how war and organizing for war undermined many Jeffersonian principles (especially the hatred of debt, centralized government, and investment of scarce resources in the military)."[10]

Another Ivy Leaguer who influenced Walt's thinking was Reinhold Niebuhr, a Missouri-born graduate of Yale Divinity School. A social democrat and a staunch friend of labor, Niebuhr preached liberalism at home and interventionism abroad during the early 1940s but developed ambivalent feelings about the looming confrontation with the Soviet Union at the end of the decade. In *The Irony of American History*, a book which was required reading for all of Walt's undergraduates and graduate students, Niebuhr worried that America's Cold Warriors would inadvertently adopt the authoritarian tactics of their adversaries in the Kremlin.[11] With Becker, Beard, Adams, and Niebuhr accounted for, Walt added two final ingredients to his recipe for writing good history: a dash of cynicism, often drawn from Lord Acton, the 19th-century Cambridge don who once famously quipped that "the strong man with the dagger is followed by

the weak man with the sponge;" and a profound anxiety, based on the early warnings of Alexis de Tocqueville, on the corrosive effect of war on America's democracy.[12]

All six of these figures made appearances in Walt's legendary survey of US foreign relations at Cornell. The class met on Tuesday, Thursday, and, yes, Saturday mornings, first in the Goldwin Smith auditorium and later, at the height of the Vietnam War, in Bailey Hall, which seated close to 1600. A big part of the attraction was Walt's persona, a modest fellow who delivered extraordinary lectures without notes, without props, and without raising his voice. His teaching style was indelibly influenced by his mentor at Wisconsin. Fred Harvey Harrington had "strode up and down restlessly before undergraduate classes," Walt recalled, "rapidly laying out the evolution of American global power and doing so without any notes before 450 students at one time."[13] Walt was more laid back. A lanky "tie and jacket" man, he would arrive for class precisely at 11:15, scrawl an outline on the blackboard, speak for exactly fifty minutes, and then draw things to a close by asking, "What, then, can we say in conclusion?"

Walt was a gifted story teller. Anthony Fels (Class of 1971) remembered that "each lecture was truly a work of narrative art, constructed with a provocative beginning, middle sections of development, and crystal-clear conclusions."[14] History majors would frequently bring their boyfriends or girlfriends, and sometimes even their parents, on Saturday mornings, and the final lecture always received a standing ovation. Non-majors were equally impressed. "Walt LaFeber," hotel school alum Andrew Tisch recalled, "was the professor you never forgot."[15] It did not matter whether a student's politics leaned left or right. As James Doub (Class of 1969) recently reminded one of the contributors to this volume, "you and I were on polar ends of the political spectrum back in our days together," yet "we shared a fondness and awe of a professor, who was well beyond any of the many learned and talented scholars" on

campus.[16] Other Cornell undergraduates who later became distinguished historians, including Nancy Cott, Mark Lytle, and Drew McCoy, were similarly inspired by Walt's teaching. David Maisel (Class of 1968), who pursued a career in finance, struck up a personal correspondence with Walt that would last a lifetime. "Those of us who took that course enjoyed a learning experience that we can probably never adequately describe or praise," Richard Immerman recalled many years later. "In a number of specific cases, like my own, it changed lives."[17]

That Walt's approach appealed to Cornell students of differing political persuasions presents a sharp contrast to some early reactions on the part of more established academics outside the Cornell community. The decline of McCarthyism during the late 1950s had made it unacceptable to apply such slurs as "communist" to the new generation of revisionist historians. However, another more "respectable" label quickly emerged as a means of accomplishing the same purpose. That label was "economic determinist," and it soon became the epithet of choice among many early critics of the Wisconsin School, who claimed that because of their political biases, these young historians ignored non-economic factors and thereby seriously distorted the historical record.

What was particularly striking about the label was its use in an effort to discredit Marxists and revisionists alike. That the Wisconsin historians had learned from Williams, who in turn had profound respect for Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution, gave the "economic determinist" label a superficial credibility. Yet in reality, the label merely provided a convenient excuse for a wholesale evasion of embarrassing economic issues on the part of establishment academics themselves. After Walt's first book, *The New Empire*, won the American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Prize in 1963, establishment critics found it harder to apply the label to him with any credibility. Even so, as late as 1966, when one of the

coauthors of this chapter was applying for his own first teaching position, one interviewer, knowing his academic lineage, explicitly asked if he was "an economic determinist." His answer, "if you'll tell me what it is, I'll tell you if I am one," elicited an approving laugh from Walt when he learned about it afterward; it also sufficiently disarmed the search committee so that he got the job. Nevertheless, the very emergence of the phrase as a pejorative of choice underlines an insecurity and defensiveness on the part of establishment historians that generations of Cornell students happily did not share.

Walt's Jimmy Stewart-like "Mr. LaFeber Goes to Bailey Hall" routine was not the only reason his survey of foreign policy was so successful. The topics he covered were exceptionally diverse. For starters, Walt incorporated a crash course in Cornell history into his panoramic narrative. Students learned that Andrew Dickson White was not only the university's first president but also Ulysses Grant's commissioner to Santo Domingo and Grover Cleveland's minister to Russia, and that one of White's successors, Jacob Gould Schurman, was ambassador to China and Weimar Germany during the 1920s. Willard Straight (Class of 1901) served as American consul-general in Mukden, China, where he helped prevent the open door from slamming shut during the Taft administration, and later accompanied Woodrow Wilson's peace planners to Paris, where he died of complications from "the Spanish flu" in December 1918. Edward M. House (Class of 1881), Wilson's de facto national security adviser and Straight's boss, drafted key portions of the Versailles Treaty. During World War I, Walter Teagle (Class of 1900) became president of Standard Oil of New Jersey and broke Britain's monopoly over Persian Gulf petroleum a decade later. Walt pointed out that William Rogers, Eisenhower's second attorney general and Nixon's first secretary of state, and Sol Linowitz, Jimmy Carter's point man during negotiations with Panama over the canal, both held Cornell law degrees. And

as neoconservatives climbed ever higher up the policymaking pyramid in Washington during the 1990s, Walt reminded students that it was Allan Bloom, a big man on the Arts Quad who had taught political philosophy during the late 1960s and loomed large at the residential community of Telluride House, who convinced Paul Wolfowitz and a posse of Cornell classmates that they could and should change the world.

Walt's most memorable lectures, however, featured riveting and sometimes revisionist portraits of more important historical figures. He made visionaries like James Madison and empire-builders like William Henry Seward come to life. He dazzled students with the stories of "great losers" like Aaron Burr, whose conspiratorial machinations in the trans-Appalachian West during Jefferson's second term were right out of a screenplay for a Hollywood blockbuster, and Henry Wallace, another Midwesterner who questioned the wisdom of the East Coast elite and was run out of Harry Truman's Washington on a rail. Walt called out liars like James K. Polk and demagogues like Joseph McCarthy. And he praised those rare souls who dared to speak truth to power, including Daniel Webster, who fought Jacksonian expansionism during the 1840s, and George Kennan, who cautioned against "imperial overstretch" in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and again in the Middle East early in the new millennium.

Perhaps the most remarkable historical figure to make an appearance in the course was Brooks Adams, Henry's eccentric brother and the author of *The New Empire*, a title that Walt would borrow for his own Beveridge prize-winning first book. Brooks had urged policymakers such as Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt to make the United States a world power as the 19th century drew to a close, Walt explained, and his vision of a "new empire" helped inspire TR and others to seize the opportunity for global economic and strategic expansion provided by the breakdown of the Spanish empire in early 1898. At the same time, Walt was quick to point

out that many years later, Brooks came to have serious second thoughts about the policy course that he had so confidently advocated in the late 1890s. The universe, Brooks wrote in 1919, "far from being an expression of law originating in a single primary cause, is a chaos which admits of reaching no equilibrium, and with which man is doomed eternally and hopelessly to contend."[18] To the delight of his students, Walt ended the lecture by singing Brooks's late-in-life shaving song, which went, "Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn." By the third "goddamn" the lecture hall was usually convulsed with laughter.

Walt did not leave everyone laughing. Without access to her transcript, one cannot be certain that Ann Coulter (Class of 1984), the founding editor of the conservative *Cornell Review* who would later become a far-right flamethrower, ever took his class, but "Frenchy LaFeber" was clearly not her favorite teacher. "Professor Walter LaFeber said Reagan's Latin American policy was 'the diplomatic counterpart of trying to use gasoline to extinguish a gasoline fire,'" Coulter complained in *Treason*, her 2003 diatribe against liberalism. "The Creative Writing Department's loss was the History Department's gain!" Claiming that Walt had been "proved spectacularly wrong in everything he ever said about the Cold War," she sneered that his won-loss record had not improved after 9/11 because, like most academics, he tried "to make simple ideas sound complex," as when he "referred to American intervention abroad to make the world safe for democracy as 'Wilsonianism.'"[19] One can only imagine Ann Coulter's dismay upon learning that Walt had been the first recipient of Cornell's John M. Clark award for excellence in teaching back in 1966, when she was still in kindergarten.

Walt regarded Coulter's hatchet-job as a badge of honor, and his students had no difficulty recognizing who was the spectacularly wrong simpleton. One undergraduate summed up the impact of Walt's teaching this way on ratemyprofessors.com in 2005: "This guy is the

best prof. that I have had at Cornell. His lectures are literally works of art. … You must have him before he retires."[20] Walt's PhD students echoed this high praise. "His brilliant lectures on American foreign relations at Cornell persuaded me to specialize in diplomatic history as a graduate student," Susan Brewer recalled long afterward. "Along with the Monroe Doctrine and the Yalta Conference, there was room for Herman Melville, Jane Addams and John Wayne."[21] Anyone wishing to recapture the spirit of Walt's amazing courses should skip *Treason* and have a look instead at his best-selling textbook, *The American Age*.

Walt was well aware of how effective he was in the lecture hall, but he probably did his best teaching inside his office, first in Sibley Hall and then on the fourth floor of McGraw Tower. Walt's office décor put students at ease. A long-suffering fan of the Chicago Cubs, he kept an autographed photo of their Hall of Fame shortstop Ernie Banks on his desk with the inscription "Keep going Walt," and he always reminded visitors that "anyone can have a bad century."[22] The inside of his office door featured two distinctive items. There was George Santayana's famous dictum, as updated by Walt LaFeber: "Those who don't know the past are doomed to repeat it, but those who do know the past are doomed to repeat it anyway." And there was a magazine ad for "Big Wally," a household cleaner from the 1970s.

The line outside Walt's office on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons always snaked down the hall, but he did not head home until he had spoken with everyone, undergraduates first and then graduate students. Jeffrey Engel remembers walking into 432 McGraw Hall as a freshman

and being greeted warmly. Walt "gave me a chance though he did not know me at all. He gave everyone a chance," Engel said. "He also gave willingly of his time, to an extent that I now, as a professor myself, find almost incomprehensible."[23] Eric Alterman tells a similar story about how writing an honors thesis with Walt changed his life. "Students would line up for hours to speak to him during office hours, trading slots in the queue the way others exchanged beers and joints back at the dorm," Alterman smiled years later. It was well worth the wait, however, because as he put the finishing touches on his latest book, Alterman found himself "using some of the same notes, which I saved because they remind me of how hard Walt made me work to live up to his demanding expectations."[24] Jessica Wang, who began as a biology and chemistry double major, recalls that Walt was not only a superb teacher but also a remarkable mentor "who knew how to match his students' experiences with their evolving academic identities." As she pursued a senior thesis on nuclear age politics, Walt suggested trying MIT as the right place to combine a science background with graduate studies in history. She confesses, however, that after working with Walt, "any PhD program other than Cornell was bound to be anti-climactic."[25]

Walt's graduate seminars were modeled on Harrington's, with heavy doses of reading (sometimes five books a week), lots of papers, and scintillating conversation. He could not abide sloppy writing, and years later the historians he trained still think twice before splitting an infinitive or ending a sentence with a preposition. Indeed, many still refuse to do either. He emphasized the importance of archival research, but he was not the sort of scholar who would cross an ocean to check a comma, and when dissertation work dragged on too long, he would remind his weary graduate students that the perfect was the enemy of the good. Anne Foster, who worked with Walt during the 1990s, could not imagine a better mentor. "We always had to

listen well to hear praise. Not that he withheld it. But he was not effusive," she recalled. "One day, though, he said to me, Shannon Smith, Lorena Oropeza, Sayuri Shimizu and Susan Brewer that he benefited by the prejudice of Harvard and Yale, which at that point still rarely to never accepted women for PhDs in foreign relations history. … That felt odd to us when we were of course the ones who benefited."[26]

Some of Walt's undergraduates and PhD students pursued careers in government service rather than the ivory tower. "Many of us became LaFeber addicts, taking his classes, becoming history majors—of American foreign policy, that is," John Wolff (Class of 1990) told a reporter in 2006. "We'd pester him to mentor our honors theses, name our fish 'Wally' and hope one day that we'd be the ones calling on him for advice from our future perches in the State Department, White House, Pentagon, CIA, NSA or from wherever it was we were going to change the world."[27] Several Cornell alums would actually make those calls. Samuel "Sandy" Berger, who graduated in 1967 and went on to serve as Bill Clinton's NSC adviser, remembered that "Cornell had a great government department at that time, with Clinton Rossiter, Andrew Hacker, Walter LaFeber, and George Kahin." In Walt's case, of course, Berger got the department wrong, but he got the experience right. More important, he kept in touch with Walt over the years.[28]

Stephen Hadley, who graduated two years after Berger, served as NSC adviser during George W. Bush's second term. "When I was at Cornell, I took Walter LaFeber's course in diplomatic history," Hadley recalled five decades later. "He was a wonderful diplomatic historian, and there are a whole group of people, Paul Wolfowitz, Eric Edelman, Dan Fried, … who came to Washington and did foreign policy because they were inspired by his course. I was one of those people."[29] Walt crossed paths with Paul Wolfowitz at Cornell's Telluride House in the 1960s but had little contact with him thereafter.[30] Eric Edelman, who wrote his honors thesis

with LaFeber before migrating rightward and finding his way into Dick Cheney's inner circle, remarked that although Walt was "one of the leading members of the Wisconsin School of revisionist diplomatic history," he was "also culturally actually sort of a conservative person."[31] Dan Fried, who became a career ambassador at the State Department, always cherished his time at Cornell. "Walt LaFeber was an intellectual guide and mentor for a generation of foreign policy officials, myself included," he tweeted in March 2021. "He nailed the combination of circumstance, ideas, and people that drives history. A great person. And a good one."[32]

When it came to direct political involvement, on the other hand, Walt had a natural skepticism toward academic self-righteousness. He well understood the difference between knowledge, or the accumulation of information, and wisdom, which was about the use one made of whatever information one chose to acquire. In a world marked by growing complexity and increasingly rapid global change, it was all too easy to amass enormous knowledge, and power, without thereby demonstrating any discernible wisdom. The most dangerous situations were when policy-makers, and their academic advisors, allowed a belief in their own virtue to dictate which information they chose to accumulate and which they chose to ignore. Thus, Walt had no time for "action intellectuals" like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose role as JFK's court historian had made him complicit in the Bay of Pigs invasion. "Well, they did it, they really did it," he told one of the authors of this essay on April 17, 1961. The most appalling aspect of the entire episode was the combination of arrogant self-righteousness and willful ignorance of Cuban history on the part of both Schlesinger and a president who had always considered himself a historian.

Even with respect to on-campus events such as the anti-Vietnam War teach-ins, which began at Cornell in 1965, Walt held back for almost a year before agreeing to participate. He

regarded the teach-ins as more political than academic events, and he was reluctant to cross the line. When in early 1966 word got out that Walt was speaking at the next teach-in, the Memorial Auditorium in Willard Straight Hall filled to capacity an hour in advance. After a student asked Walt a question, he began his response with the words, "As I said in the paper …" In short, Walt treated his participation in the teach-in with the same seriousness he showed in his presentations at academic conferences. For those in attendance, this was the moment when teach-ins went mainstream at Cornell and helped fuel the nationwide anti-war movement that ultimately led Lyndon Johnson to refuse to seek re-election. Neither Walt nor the other Cornell teach-in participants were delighted with Johnson's replacement, of course, yet the moment stands as striking evidence of Walt's insistence upon scholarly integrity in his teaching, not only in the classroom and but also in more informal settings.

Although Lloyd Gardner later joked that Walt must have done something terribly wrong to have trained two NSC advisers, his old friends and Cornell colleagues recognized him for the master teacher that he was. Joel Silbey, whose San Francisco Giants won three World Series while Walt's Cubs were winning just one, had high praise for his office mate's teaching. "I've always been impressed by the extraordinary devotion of his students," Silbey marveled. "We all strive for that; he achieves it. We've always considered him to be our leader and model of what we'd like to be." Glenn Altschuler, a professor of American Studies and himself a Cornell PhD., agreed wholeheartedly. "Justly celebrated for his teaching and scholarship, Walt is great, truly great, in my judgment, because of the way he lives each day, unfailingly attentive to students, staff and colleagues," Altschuler explained. "He is Midwestern *mensch*—the best thing that's happened to Cornell in the last half century."[33] Tim Borstelmann, who joined the Cornell faculty as LaFeber's "heir apparent" in 1991 and temporarily camped out in his office, recalled many

years later how Walt had "freely shared his superb book collection, a mini-library of our discipline at the time."[34] Fred Logevall, who replaced Borstelmann in 2004, remembers Walt as "a distinguished scholar, a true gentleman, and, most of all, a deeply humane and generous person."[35] Mary Beth Norton, the first female historian to win tenure at Cornell, agreed that Walt was one of a kind. "No other member of the department has commanded the same respect as Walt in the 35 years I have known him," she exclaimed shortly after he retired. "His integrity, humaneness and commitment to principle mean that his comments always carry much weight in department meetings."[36]

These qualities had come into sharp focus four decades earlier during a crisis that put Cornell in the headlines around the world. On April 18, 1969, African American students protesting recent racist incidents on campus occupied Willard Straight Hall, issued a set of non-negotiable demands, and smuggled fifteen rifles and ammunition into the basement. Racial tensions had been building for months, but most faculty and students were in a state of shock. "Oh my God, look at those goddamned guns," Steve Starr of the Associated Press gasped as he snapped a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Thomas W. Jones and a half-dozen Black undergraduates carrying rifles and draped with bandoliers as they exited the Straight and marched across campus to the newly established Africana Studies Center. The crisis grew even more ominous after Jones told a radio interviewer two days later that both the faculty and administration were racist and that "Cornell University has three hours to live."[37]

Walt, who had just become chair of the history department, was horrified by these developments. He had been deeply troubled by the events of 1968—the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy and the race riots in Washington DC and elsewhere—and he supported Cornell's plans to recruit more African American students and to establish a Black

Studies Program. He balked at the creation of a separate "Black College," however, and was appalled by the armed occupation of the Straight. When President James Perkins (no relation to Dexter) agreed to reverse course and nullify sanctions that had been imposed on Jones and his comrades, Walt stepped down as department chair and flew to New York City with a group of senior faculty to meet with the executive committee of the Cornell board of trustees. The fallout was swift. Perkins was forced out and replaced by his provost, Dale Corson, several prominent faculty, including Allan Bloom, resigned, and, sadly, Clinton Rossiter committed suicide.

Walt toyed with the idea of moving to the University of Maryland, but in the end, he chose stay at Cornell, where he remained an outspoken champion of academic freedom. "What a university is all about is rational discourse," Walt told Donald Downs, a University of Wisconsin political scientist and Cornell alum who had taken his survey of US foreign relations the spring following the Straight takeover, long afterward. "Once you introduce any kind of element of force into the university, you compromise the institution." For Walt, this was totally unforgivable. "We have to make a distinction between procedure and politics," he explained. "I'm a relativist in terms of object and conclusion. I don't think I am necessarily right. What I am absolutist about is the procedure you use to get there."[38]

By the mid-1970s, Walt was widely regarded as the most distinguished and most respected member of the Cornell faculty. His lecture courses had begun to shrink, and he held forth back in Goldwin Smith rather than Bailey Hall. Still, his books on the Cold War and the Panama Canal received rave reviews and his op-eds appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. As always, his teaching and his research were inextricably intertwined. As part of Cornell's celebration of America's bicentennial, President Corson invited Walt to do something that no other faculty member had ever done—deliver the university's commencement

address. For Corson, who had worked closely with Walt to quell the Straight crisis, this was a no-brainer. "It was the bicentennial," he explained many years later, and "I felt that something significant should be said by someone who could say it with authority."[39] True to form, Walt delivered. A university must assume the role of "midwife when revolutionary ideas enter an un-revolutionary society," he told the graduates in May 1976. "The founders of this nation and the founders of Cornell shared a common commitment, indeed a common passion, a belief in the power of ideas to transform individual lives and improve human society."[40] This was exactly what Walt's teaching had done over the years for hundreds of his students.

Having witnessed the university nearly implode due to what he regarded as bureaucratic incompetence, Walt had a jaded view of administrative work. He revered Dale Corson and respected his successors, Frank H. T. Rhodes and Hunter Rawlings. Nevertheless, although offered the opportunity twice, he was not interested in serving as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. When former students sought his advice about whether or not to become administrators, he would chuckle and recall what Alfred Kahn, a Cornell dean who had picked up the pieces after the Straight takeover, told him: "You'll spend 85 percent of your time holding the hands of the 15 percent of the faculty you don't respect, but it will only *seem* like an eternity." Walt's message was clear. Choosing a career in administration would likely mean abandoning life as a teacher-scholar.

Walt never became an administrator, but as his career drew to a close he was recognized as the avatar of the university. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, President Rawlings invited him to address the Cornell community on a day of national remembrance. Standing before 12,000 students, faculty, and staff gathered on the Arts Quad, Walt mourned the dead but warned the living about the likely consequences of "a new war—the first war, as it is being

called, of the 21st century." Twenty-one Cornell alums died on 9/11, along with nearly 3000 other Americans. "Their deaths will have been in vain," Walt sighed, "if they result in a war, which will necessarily be long and costly, in which we do not remember the fundamental values of our individual rights, and our individual obligations to a larger community."[41]

Five years later, with the United States mired in a long and costly war in Iraq which called into question America's fundamental values, Walt delivered his valedictory lecture at the Beacon Theater in Manhattan. By then, he had been named Cornell's first Andrew and James Tisch distinguished university professor. Cornell had originally planned to hold the event uptown at the American Museum of Natural History, but the response from alums was so overwhelming that the university opted for a bigger venue on Broadway. The 2500 Cornellians lucky enough to be there on April 25, 2006 were treated to one last magical tour through 200 years of American foreign policy conducted by the maestro they first encountered in Goldwin Smith or Bailey Hall.

In the beginning, there was John Quincy Adams, whom Walt always regarded as America's greatest secretary of state. (This may be the only point on which Walt and Yale's Samuel "Wave the Flagg" Bemis agreed.) JQA was great not just because he loved opera and swam nude in the Potomac, but also because he was committed to the US national interest while appreciating both the limits of power and the power of ideas. "America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature." Adams had remarked in 1821. Following this statement of faith, JQA issued a warning that by the time of Walt's valedictory lecture had proved prescient several times over. "But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," because "she well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign

independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication." Adams emphasized that the consequences of such an American misstep would be dire. "She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her spirit."[42] In not so many words, John Quincy Adams was saying that exporting democracy was a risky business in places like Latin America, where wars of independence had unleashed radical social forces that were proving difficult to control; it was even riskier in terms of what it would do to America itself.

Had Woodrow Wilson heeded JQA's warning, Walt suggested, he might not have been so quick to try to make the world safe for democracy a century later. Perhaps because Wilson was a political scientist rather than a historian (or perhaps because he attended Princeton rather than Cornell), he never fully understood that democracy doesn't travel well. Wilson's famous prescription for bringing order to revolutionary Mexico—"we must teach the South Americans to elect good men"—might have been a nice sound bite back in 1914, but his decision to send Black Jack Pershing and 6000 US troops south of the Rio Grande two years later led many Mexicans to charge that America was exporting democracy at gunpoint. When left-wing radicals translated national self-determination into revolutionary nationalism in China, Russia, and parts of Europe during and after World War I, Wilson was not amused, and he aligned himself with some decidedly undemocratic forces to combat Bolshevism, which he came to regard as the biggest threat to democracy, American-style. The self-righteous Wilson, of course, failed to see the irony in employing undemocratic means to promote democracy, but his pragmatic secretary of state, Robert Lansing, was very well aware that the Presbyterian in the White House was "playing with dynamite" by preaching self-determination to peoples whose political and economic objectives were very different from those of the United States.

Nowhere, Walt emphasized, was the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of self-determination greater than in the Middle East, where Wilson's Fourteen Points publicly promised democracy to Arabs, Kurds, and other subject peoples liberated from Ottoman rule while France and Britain, with America's blessing, secretly carved out spheres of influence at Versailles. Over the strong objections of Arab nationalists, the French established protectorates over Lebanon and Syria while the British made similar arrangements in Palestine and Transjordan. Then, having already occupied oil-rich Mesopotamia, Britain fused three Ottoman provinces—Kurdish Mosul in the north, Sunni Baghdad in the center, and Shiite Basra in the south—into Iraq, an artificial nation-state headed by a king whose vocabulary did not include words like democracy or free elections. In short, having set out to make the world safe *for* democracy in 1917, Woodrow Wilson helped make Iraq safe *from* democracy three years later.

Walt closed the lecture by retelling a story that most of his audience had heard in one form or another in his unforgettable survey of US foreign relations. Among the young progressives who accompanied Wilson to Versailles was William Christian Bullitt, a Yale-educated action intellectual from a Main Line Philadelphia family who was deeply committed to exporting democracy to the world. Thoroughly disillusioned by what he regarded at Wilson's betrayal of American principles at the conference table, Bullitt and several of his friends very publicly resigned from the US delegation. When a startled reporter asked, "Now what are you going to do?" Bullitt replied: "I'm going to lie in the sands of the Riviera and watch the world go to hell." Walt brought the house down with his own laconic quip: "He went, and it did." The "great losers" were not only Woodrow Wilson and William Bullitt, but more important, the Arabs, Asians, and Africans who were foolish enough to believe that American leaders meant what they said about self-determination.

Although Walt did not mention the relevance of all this for the contemporary Middle East that evening, everyone knew he regarded George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq as a fool's errand. "The Bush administration trying to act like Woodrow Wilson abroad," he had wisecracked privately eighteen months earlier, "resembles Al Capone trying to proselytize converts to Christianity at a Bingo party."[43] Being a good historian frequently entailed speaking truth to power. "Academic freedom means the freedom, indeed means the requirement," Walt had reminded another contributor to this tribute at about the same time, "to criticize American society when evidence accumulates that society has gone off in the wrong direction."[44]

Walt's final lecture was not a Jonathan Edwards-style fire and brimstone sermon, however, but rather a Reinhold Niebuhr-style meditation on the irony of American history. This came as no surprise to his former students, who knew that Walt had always been a teacher, not a preacher. Of the two Cornell alums of Walt's foreign relations survey who went on to become NSC advisers, one, Sandy Berger, was seated in the front row at the Beacon. Like the rest of the crowd, he gave Walt a standing ovation. The other was a last-minute no-show. The pressure of making policy in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere prevented Stephen Hadley from making the trip from Washington to New York City. Had Hadley been able to attend Walt's curtain call on Broadway, however, he surely would have recognized that the realism of John Quincy Adams, the irony of Reinhold Niebuhr, and the gentle wisdom of his old teacher made quite a compelling case for rethinking the Bush administration's approach to the war in Iraq.

After retiring, Walt continued to shake his head about current US foreign policy while serving as Cornell's ambassador emeritus at alumni events around the country. Walt's final scholarly article appeared in 2009 in the *Political Science Quarterly*, where he applied the lessons from his valedictory lecture explicitly to American intervention in the Middle East early

in the twenty-first century.[45] That article, like everything else he ever wrote, emphasized that Americans cannot meet the challenges facing the world today unless they become more aware of the past. "The message of LaFeber's scholarship is that US history cannot be written from the inside only," Andrew Rotter and Frank Costigliola explained in their 2004 tribute to Walt. "Each one of LaFeber's books is cosmopolitan, in that it undercuts ethnocentrism, solipsism, and a cranky isolationism by situating the United States in an international system, wherein people in other countries are at least to some extent agents of their own fates."[46]

Nor has Walt's impact upon Cornell students ceased with his death. One of the co-authors of this remembrance, who earned a BA and PhD under Walt's supervision during the 1960s and who shared his fascination with Latin America, has taught a regular Summer Session course at Cornell since 2019.[47] Ever since Walt's passing, on the first day of class he tells the students about LaFeber's impact upon Cornell and upon his own career. He emphasizes his own responsibility to pass along the research skills which Walt taught him, so that these newest Cornellians, too, will become part of Walt's enduring legacy.

Alison Dreizen (Class of 1974), a LaFeber enthusiast who serves as general counsel for the American Historical Association, recently summed up the scholar, the teacher, and the man quite well. "When I arrived at Cornell in 1970, LaFeber was already a campus legend," she wrote a few months after Walt's death. "His lectures were mesmerizing," because "he seamlessly wove together the influences of decision makers, domestic politics, intellectual theory, popular culture, and historical relationships in both the United States and other nations." The standing ovation that she and thousands of others delivered at the Beacon Theater was proof of all that, but there was also something larger at work. "Walter LaFeber was a mentor to me and countless others in the truest sense of the word: an adviser, a consultant, a cheerleader, and a

friend," Dreizen explained. "He cared about his students not just academically but as people. He proved that you could be a brilliant innovative thinker, a mesmerizing speaker, and a prolific writer and still be a wonderful human being."[48] The contributors to this volume and scores of other Cornell alums could not agree more.

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[1] An earlier and briefer version of this essay appeared in the August 2006 issue of *Passport*, the SHAFR newsletter.

[2] Readers can find a video of LaFeber's valedictory lecture at https://www.cornell.edu/video/walter-lafeber-beacon-theatre-2006. For those who never had the pleasure of seeing him in action, this is a great way to get a glimpse of his inimitable delivery and his remarkable story-telling ability.

[3] Perkins's successor as John L. Senior Professor of American Civilization was Clinton Rossiter, a political scientist, but it was Walt who was hired to teach diplomatic history. Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick, *Cornell: A History 1940-2015* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 92-93.

[4] For more on LaFeber's background and it's significance, see especially chapters 2, 5, and 7 in this volume.

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

[6] Lloyd C. Gardner and Thomas J. McCormick, "Walter LaFeber: The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist," *Diplomatic History*, 28 (Nov. 2004): 612-24.

[7] Walter LaFeber, "The Tension between Democracy and Capitalism during the American Century," *Diplomatic History*, 23 (Spring 1999): 263, n. 1.

[8] Carl 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)

[9] On Beard, see Walter LaFeber, "The World and the United States," *American Historical Review*, 100:4 (Oct. 1995), 1024-26.

[10] LaFeber, "The World and the United States," 1019.

[11] On Niebuhr, see Walter LaFeber, *America Russia and the Cold War, 1945-2006* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 52-54, 450.

[12] See, for example, Walter LaFeber, "The Last War, the Next War, and the New Revisionists," *democracy*, 1 (January 1981): 93.

[13] Walter LaFeber, "Fred Harvey Harrington: Teacher and Friend," in Thomas McCormick and Walter LaFeber, eds., *Behind the Throne: Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 11.

[14] Fels quoted in Andrew Rotter and Frank Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," *Diplomatic History*, 28:5 (November 2004): 629.

[15] Tisch quoted in 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.

[16] Doub email to Richard Immerman. 20 Dec. 2022.

[17] Immerman quoted in Rotter and Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," 630.

[18] Brooks Adams quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Cornell University Press, 1963), 95.

[19] Ann Coulter, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003), 175, 188.

[20] Posted March, 12, 2005, https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/professor/161645.

[21] Brewer quoted in Sam Roberts, "Walter LaFeber, Historian Who Dissected Diplomacy, Dies at 87," *NYT* (March 10, 2021).

[22] Franklin Crawford, "'Keep Going Walt': An Old-School Historian Who Inspired a Generation of LaFeber Addicts," *Cornell Chronicle* (April 26, 2006).

[23] Engel quoted in Rotter and Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," 628.

[24] Eric Alterman, "The Remarkable Influence of Walter LaFeber," *The Nation* (March 17, 2021).

[25] Jessica Wang emails, June 22 and August 19, 2022.

[26] Anne Foster email, March 21, 2021.

[27] Wolff quoted in Crawford, "'Keep Going Walt.'"

[28] Berger Oral History Interview, March 24, 2005, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/samuel-r-berger-oral-history; LaFeber to Douglas Little, June 5, 2003.

[29] Hadley quoted in "State of Play: An Interview with Steve Hadley," *The Asia Chess Board Podcast* (21 Oct. 2019): https://www.csis.org/analysis/state-play-interview-steve-hadley.

[30] David Dudley, "Paul's Choice," *Cornell Alumni Magazine* (July/August 2004): 54.

[31] Edelman Oral History, June 2, 2017, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/eric-edelman-oral-history.

[32] Fried tweet, March 13, 2021, https://twitter.com/ambdanfried?lang=en.

[33] Silbey and Altschuler quoted in Crawford, "'Keep Going Walt.'"

[34] Thomas Borstelmann, "A Drive-By Tour of US Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, 43 (April 2019): 391.

[35] Fredrik Logevall, "In Memoriam: Walter LaFeber," *Passport* (September 2021): 58.

[36] Norton quoted in Crawford, "'Keep Going Walt.'"

[37] Starr and Jones quoted in Ian Wilhelm, "Ripples from a Protest Past," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (April 17, 2016).

[38] Quoted in Donald A. Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 18.

[39] Corson quoted in Crawford, "'Keep Going Walt.'"

[40] Portions of Walt's address are quoted in Altschuler and Kramnick. *Cornell: A History 1940-2015*, 153-54, and Daniel Aloi, "Kotlikoff: Cornell Has 'Indelible, Enduring' Impact on Students," *Cornell Chronicle* (May 29. 2016).

[41] LaFeber remarks, 14 Sept. 2001, https://news. cornell.edu/stories/2001/09/lafeber-gives-remarks-national-day-prayer-and-remembrance; Altschuler and Kramnick, *Cornell: A History 1940-2015*, 449.

[42] JQA, "Address on July 4, 1821," in Walter LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams and the American Continental Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1965), 45.

[43] LaFeber to David Langbart, October 16, 2004.

[44] LaFeber quoted in Rotter and Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," 631.

[45] Walter LaFeber, "The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly*, 124:1 (Spring 2009): 71-93.

[46] Rotter and Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," 617.

[47] See David Green, *The Containment of Latin America: A History of the Myths and Realities of the Good Neighbor Policy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).

[48] Alison Dreizen. "In Memoriam: Walter F. LaFeber," *AHA Perspectives* (Sept. 2021).