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Walter LaFeber: The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist

We first met Walt LaFeber in the fall of 1956 in Fred Harvey Harrington's seminar at the University of Wisconsin. At that time, the prevailing critique of American foreign policy in the academy was the Realist commentary most effectively presented in George Frost Kennan's *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*.[1] With the "fall" of China in 1949 to the Communists, the State Department and the Truman administration had been put on the defensive by Republican charges that the Nationalists had been abandoned by the United States—largely because the Government had either acted out of a tragically mistaken belief that the Communists were simply "agrarian reformers," or, in a more sinister interpretation, because leftist New Dealers had betrayed the nation. Kennan had himself proposed, while still in government, that someone undertake to respond to these accusations. The result was the series of lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago that became the book.

"Realism" appeared to posit two critiques, however, that were (and are) sometimes at odds with one another—this was increasingly evident as the century went on. On the one hand, realists cautioned against overextension, arguing that a major problem for Americans was to fit their ambitions and goals to the limitations upon power (even a power as awesome as that possessed by a nuclear-armed United States). On the other, realists argued that Americans—Wilsonian moralists to the core—tried too hard to "do the right thing" in foreign policy, leaving them at a disadvantage in a world where an unscrupulous enemy would break any treaty, pursue any chicanery, trample on any nation's independence. In short, what was needed was an unblinking look at moral man's responsibility in an immoral world, to paraphrase another of the realist founding fathers, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

The University of Wisconsin in this era remained something of an anachronism, or, looked at the other way around, ahead of its time in not taking the prevailing realist critique(s) as seriously as they were at other places where graduate students learned their history and methodology. On the contrary, categories like "realism" and "moralism-idealism" seemed a bit suspect—

1. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (New York, 1951).

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perhaps too contrived and vacuous to be analytically useful. Wisconsin was the bastion of progressivism, of course, and had a long tradition of excellence; it stood out as a university dedicated to public service as well as scholarship, and had a famed history department that stretched back to the days of Frederick Jackson Turner. The "older" generation of historians in Madison in the late 1950s included Merle Curti, Howard K. Beale, William B. Hesseltine, and Merrill Jensen. The coursework in American foreign policy was provided by Fred Harvey Harrington, already launched on a career path that would soon take him to the presidency of the university. At a time when most of the profession had turned away from the works of Charles A. Beard, these Americanists nevertheless remained Beardians. Even Curti and Beale, who often stressed the role of ideas in their work, insisted, following Beard, upon grounding those ideas in the material reality that helped produce them.

Fred Harrington had not had a great number of graduate students in previous years, but until the mid-1950s American diplomatic history did not draw nearly so well as Curti's courses in intellectual history or Hesseltine's in Civil War history. Harrington's seminar of 1956–1957, however, was to produce a bumper crop of future historians, including Walter LaFeber. Walt arrived in the fall of 1956 with a master's degree from Stanford, where he had studied with Thomas A. Bailey. All graduate students in that era, and for many years afterwards, were at least acquainted with Bailey's text, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*. It was by far the most popular text for undergraduates—and with good reason. Bailey's genius was to make history readable, and to encourage the student to understand that diplomatic history was not just one clerk talking to another. Walt learned well that if one wished to be heard, one must be read; and to be read, one must be lively; and his books have all reflected that Bailey influence, even as his interpretations have gone in a variety of directions other than Bailey's emphasis upon the role of public opinion.

Harrington's seminar in American diplomatic history that fall was quite large—the beginning of the "boom" in diplomatic history. In addition to the three of us, there were a number who would have distinguished careers, among them Carl Parrini (later of Northern Illinois University), David Healy (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), and Bernie Wax (American Jewish Historical Society). Barbara Welter (Hunter College), who was to make her mark in women's history, joined us second semester. Harrington himself proved to be a physically imposing (6¢4≤ with a powerful voice and manner) and intellectually awesome presence. Deeply cynical about human nature and motives, he nonetheless nurtured an abiding faith in democracy, one he carried over into his decade-long presidency of the university in the 1960s and to his directorship of the Ford Foundation in India in the 1970s. He reconciled those contrary tendencies of cynicism and democratic idealism with a heavy sense of irony that permeated his sharp, dry humor, his scholarship, and his seminar stewardship. (Walt himself once wrote in his inscription to Tom's copy of *The New Empire*: "To Tom—who shares a love for," among other things, "irony" and

"Fred Harrington." Walt's own abiding sense of irony in his writings, teaching, and persona are quite reminiscent of Fred.)

In the first week, Fred read off a huge list of books we were to read for the next week's discussion. Graduate school was quite a shock, until one realized that "reading," in the sense we were used to, meant something else at this level. It meant "extracting" the thesis of any book assigned, not starting at the first page and going straight through to the end. The books included a whole variety of approaches and subjects, but Harrington never told us beforehand, or after the discussion, what books were good or bad, which ones were especially useful. For all that, we were on our own. Among that first batch was Kennan's *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*, Hans Morgenthau's *In Defense of the National Interest*, Robert Osgood's *Ideals and Self-Interests in American Foreign Relations*, Frank Tannenbaum's *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy*, and Charles Beard's *The Idea of National Interest*.[2] If a question came up during discussions, Harrington, a consummate bibliophile, always had another book to suggest. We covered various special subjects, such as ethnicity, interest groups, and the differences between political science and history. Harrington himself seemed indifferent throughout to the underlying theories of our readings. His methodology was inductive rather than theory-driven. (Yet, when the time came, he would call back to Wisconsin William Appleman Williams, still the most stimulating and provocative theory-man who has ever written on U.S. foreign policy.) The seminar students, however, were excited about the theories and, especially, the realist perspective of Morgenthau and Kennan. Only Carl Parrini, the sole seminar member with economics as an outside field, mentioned Beard. Our collective failure to engage Beard's arguments led Harrington to suggest, at seminar's end, that we reread Beard's *The Idea of National Interest* and make him the focus for our next meeting. Harrington often ended seminars in that fashion. After saying little, "smoking" paperclips (was he a reformed chain smoker?), and constantly taking notes on slips of paper (were those criticisms of us or merely doodles?), he would saw off whatever tree limbs we had crawled out on in the previous two hours.

The second half of the semester was given over to student critiques of papers presented. Harrington assigned two students to lead each critique and we quickly understood that he was less interested in assessing the paper's author than he was in judging the thoroughness of the two critics in demonstrating their mastery of internal and external criticism. On occasion he brought in more advanced students who were already at the dissertation stage and used them to further demonstrate the fine art of taking apart and critiquing a work. One of those was Robert Freeman Smith. Our presentations were largely based on prior

2. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*; Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York, 1951); Robert Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in American Foreign Relations* (Chicago, IL, 1953); Frank Tannenbaum, *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy* (Norman, OK, 1955); Charles A. Beard, *The Idea of National Interest* (New York, 1934).

MA or senior theses: Walt's on Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, Lloyd's on FDR and colonialism, and Tom's on Arthur S. Vandenberg and bipartisanship—all written from a conventional realist and internationalist perspective. Since Walt and Tom already had their MAs, Lloyd's new work for his master's degree received more detailed attention. Lloyd's first seminar presentation, on Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies toward European colonialism in World War II, was realist to the core. He recalls, however, that as he worked on FDR, Harrington made a point of asking, "What about economics?" At first, Lloyd simply didn't get it, and added some pages on Lend-Lease, without really grasping what Harrington was trying to suggest—that maybe the United States had some interests in the fate of the colonies that went beyond balance of power.

That year with Harrington gave us "words to live by." "Most books should have been articles and most articles should not have been published." "Most of us have only three good books in us"—the rest is just fluff and career-building (and implicitly a waste of good ink and paper). "Most books have only one idea, if that; only the rare good ones have more." In an effort to wean us from an excessive reliance on the *New York Times* as the paper of record, he tweaked it with the usual "All the news that fits, we print"; "The *Chicago Tribune* has better international coverage than the *New York Times*"; and "The *Times* is as useful as any other newspaper in wrapping trash." More positively, and repeatedly, Harrington over time imbued us with the Wisconsin Idea, rooted in LaFollette Progressivism, that suggested that scholarship was as important as teaching: scholarship that was not afraid to question conventional wisdom and accepted truths; scholarship that produced new ways to think about and address the social, economic, and political ills of the State and of the Nation. In a sense, the University and the State were to be joined through the nexus of citizen-scholars. Yet he also made clear that the Wisconsin Idea had its dangers to be guarded against—that it could easily degenerate into boosterism and transform the University into a servant of large corporate interests in the name of serving the whole community. Harrington's principles presciently warned against "activist" intellectuals and the notion of the "Best and Brightest," whose egos have shadowed the history of the nation since the arrival of the New Frontiersmen on the Potomac.

Inside and outside the seminar, both Lloyd and Tom quickly became good friends with Walt and with each other. That may be because all three of us brought with us much of the same personal baggage. We all grew up in small, midwestern towns, Walt in Walkerton, Indiana, population 2,000, near South Bend. We were all Protestants raised in a tradition of suspicion of centralized power. Lloyd, for example, went to Ohio Wesleyan University, a Methodist-related school; Walt went to Hanover College, a Presbyterian school in southern Indiana, while Tom graduated from the University of Cincinnati. We were all fraternity men in college. We were political moderates—Adlai Stevenson Democrats except for Tom, who liked Ike. We all married our college sweethearts and remain married to them today. In short, save for our sophistication

in choosing our spouses, we were pretty conventional raw material of the sort produced by the 1950s, and yet somehow readier than we realized for Wisconsin to work with and shape.

Propinquity helped to speed up those friendships. Our individual carrels were in the same wing and floor of the magnificent Wisconsin State Historical Society, so we would visit back and forth when we were not disturbing other folks or, more often, just take casual breaks together in the society's lobby. (Lloyd remembers a fierce debate over the relative merits of Federalists and Antifederalists that left a passing librarian shaking his head at the ability of graduate students to feel passionate about such things.) Over time, these meetings became more serious encounters at our apartments and outdoor outings, and our wives became an integral part of growing relationships. It was at our first session together, a picnic featuring Sandy LaFeber's barbecued chicken, that Walt somehow managed to endear himself to Nancy Gardner and Jeri McCormick despite insisting—much to their irritation—that boxing was an art form and Ernest Hemingway our finest writer. And it was at one of our apartment dinners that Walt confessed that he had given serious thought to abandoning graduate school for the life of novelist, thinking that political novels like *The Last Hurrah* might be a better way than academic monographs to reach a broader audience. Happily for all of us, his history has had a far longer and more enduring reach than the work of most novelists.

One source of Walt's ennui was Harrington's decision to leave teaching for the administrative post of vice president for academic affairs. Not wanting to leave us in the lurch, Harrington had given us the option of staying with him as dissertators, but none of us were certain if he would really have the time for us. At the end of the day, Walt and Tom took Harrington up on his option, while Lloyd chose William Appleman Williams as his dissertation director. (As it played out, all three of us had equal access to both Harrington and Williams. So we were all Harrington students and we were all Williams students, and our essays are to be found in the *Festschrifts* for both.)

Although Harrington had mentioned Williams in seminar a few times, none of us knew much about him. Walt owned a copy of *American-Russian Relations* and had read parts of it for his master's thesis.[3] Now we all read it and found ourselves shaking our heads in disbelief at the book's provocative "Coda" on the early Cold War, subtitled "The Sophistry of Super-Realism." We were made to feel even more anxious about Williams's impending arrival by the accounts of older students who had known Williams before and described him as "a socialist Socrates who got out on the wrong side of the bed." We soon had occasion to form our own opinions when all three of us found ourselves working as T.A.'s for Williams, either in his Foreign Relations class or in his general U.S. history survey.

3. William Appleman Williams, *American-Russian Relations, 1781–1947* (New York, 1952).

Williams's impact was immediate and electrifying. Tom remembers sitting next to Walt in the very back row, listening to Williams's first lecture on the topic of—what else?—the Open Door paradigm in American foreign policy. After it was over, Tom turned to Walt and said: "There is a Thomistic logic to everything this guy says, and if we ever accept his first premises, we are dead in the water." The shock we felt soon turned to fascination and a determination to find out what made this man tick. Part of that learning process, beyond hearing the lectures, was to observe what Williams read. Every Thursday afternoon, without fail, Williams walked into the periodical room of Memorial Library, notebook in hand, and spent the rest of the day working his way through all the new arrivals from A through Z, and not just history journals, but those in political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, literature and American Studies. And the books in his office reflected a similar span of inquiry. On one wall were books by the likes of Gunnar Myrdal, Wilhelm Dilthey, G. D. H. Cole, E.H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher, and Erich Fromn. On the other were *all* the volumes of *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* published to that point (which Williams had literally read word for word) as well as a miscellaneous collection of committee hearings.

Wanting a more hands-on opportunity for understanding Williams, we finally worked up our courage to invite Williams and his wife to dinner at Walt's apartment, a couple of blocks off campus on the second floor over Lou's Tobacco Shop. (Williams, who smoked small cigars the way Harrington "smoked" paperclips, was perhaps Lou's best customer.) The Williams charisma, evident in his lectures, turned out even stronger in close proximity. Part of the evening was pure gossip and story-telling, at which Williams excelled. And the history faculty members—once his professors and now his colleagues—were prime targets. It was all wonderfully titillating for second-year graduate students like ourselves, who could feel like we were being let in on the family secrets—and even a few skeletons in the closet. The major part of the evening, however, was conversation, at once serious but lively, about historical topics. Like countless similar discussions with Williams over the next thirty years, this first one lasted until the wee hours of the morning. Lloyd remembers one of us asking him where the New Deal fit into his interpretation. His extended reply was a précis of a later review he would write for *The Nation* of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Crisis of the Old Order*.[4] Williams's essay, entitled "Right Crisis, Wrong Order," argued that the depression was a crisis of the *new order*, an order that dated back to the late nineteenth century and had demonstrated more continuity than change in a line that ran from Mark Hanna to Woodrow Wilson to Herbert Hoover to FDR. Much of Williams's argument anticipated its fuller development four years later in the last section of his *Contours of American History*, entitled "The Age of Corporation Capitalism," which has since

4. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston, MA, 1957).

become known variously as liberal corporatism, corporate liberalism, and American neocorporatism.[5]

That late night exercise in thinking outside the box became a common experience for us in the next several years. The settings were usually informal—bull sessions in Williams's office after class, late afternoon coffee at Rennebohm's Drug Store, late afternoon beer at the Brathaus, and occasional dinners at Williams's house. The topics were wide-ranging: Marx and Freud, Beard and neo-Beardians, Hamilton and Jefferson, Madison and John Quincy Adams, internationalism and isolationism, Faulkner and Hemingway, Count Basie and Duke Ellington, Melville and Hawthorne, democratic socialists and social democrats and so forth and so on—and on. What was common to all was the search for underlying assumptions—that is, the imperative for a true intellectual to strip away and discover the assumptions and premises, usually unstated, that underlay the categories and constructs that scholars used. And the place to begin, we learned, was to discover the underlying assumptions of one's own *Weltanschauung* and to subject them to critical questioning—a process of self-examination (the "examined life," if you will) that had to be an ongoing, lifelong enterprise. There was ample opportunity for that self-criticism when, in the course of time, we began our dissertations; and when Bill was putting the finishing touches on *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and the beginning strokes on *Contours of American History*.[6] (Tom's wife, Jeri, typed the manuscript, so Tom got to see it hot off the press.) Over the course of these encounters, "Professor Williams" morphed into simply "Bill," as we all began the long and wondrous process of building friendships that endured. (Managing such informality with Harrington's awesome persona was a more difficult matter for some of us. Tom confesses that he was probably fifty years old before he could squeeze out the first "Fred" of his life.)

Harrington and Williams, while central to our intellectual metamorphosis, were not our sole influences. Other members of that neo-Beardian department played roles for some or all of us, as did an array of fellow graduate students. Consider some of the faculty influences—auditing Merrill Jensen's lectures on early American history, where he emphasized domestic social-economic conflict and took implicit issue with Williams's emphasis on empire-building; doing research papers for Merle Curti's intellectual history course, where we developed a fascination with John Q. Adams and Reinhold Niebuhr even before Williams' arrival; and having lunches with Howard Beale, whose study of Theodore Roosevelt led him to challenge our economic interpretations of America's rise to world power. For Walt and Lloyd, Philip Curtin was especially influential. All the Americanists were required to take two non-American history fields, one in medieval or ancient, the other in modern history. Profes-

5. William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland, OH, 1961).

6. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1972).

sor Curtin had developed a field called the British Empire. (Later, he would transform it into the Atlantic World and then to the even larger Third World.) Walt chose imperial Britain as his outside modern field. Curtin's study of the British Empire sharpened Walt's conceptualization of empire and encouraged him to think comparatively. So his scholarship on the American empire has always been implicitly informed by his understanding of an earlier British empire, both formal and informal. (Apparently, Walt could also project those concepts further back in time: he and Don Kagan once taught a comparative course on the Roman and American empires at Cornell in the summer of 1968.)

Also influential were other grad students. Almost too numerous to mention, any list certainly would include our seminar mate, Carl Parrini, who brought his broad command of international economics to a dissertation that would eventually become his brilliant *Heir to Empire*, a study of U.S. economic diplomacy during World War I and after; Marty Sklar, already embarked on his pioneering studies in American corporatism and progressivism that would result in his complex and sophisticated analysis of the law and the market in his *Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*;[7] and Saul Landau, who combined his political activism and his research skills to produce a bevy of provocative books on U.S. policies in Latin America. One might also note that even Wisconsin's undergraduates had their indirect impact in providing a kind of progressive milieu that required you to take notice of it even when you did not directly participate in it: a Socialist Club that was both large and active, well-attended and well-covered protest rallies and demonstrations against the Eisenhower Doctrine and the U.S. invasion of Lebanon in 1958, and the decidedly left-wing tilt of the undergraduate student newspaper, the *Daily Cardinal*. When that dominant progressivism was challenged by activist students on the Right, Center, and even the Left, the competition of ideas and ideology rubbing up against each other only added to the excitement.

In 1959, the three of us went our separate ways. Lloyd and Tom were still a year away from finishing up, but Lloyd took a teaching job at Lake Forest College and Tom stayed behind at Wisconsin as a research fellow. Walt, the workaholic embodiment of the Calvinist ethic, had already finished his dissertation by then and accepted the job-of-a-lifetime (literally, as it turned out) at Cornell University, where Dexter Perkins, the great scholar of the Monroe Doctrine, was moving toward retirement. Before we parted ways, we all did considerable soul-searching about our teaching careers. In particular, we debated whether we had an obligation to state our own assumptions to our future students or, fearing that our Wisconsin revisionism might turn students off before they engaged us, whether we should keep them to ourselves. However we each resolved that conundrum, all of us already understood what Bill

7. Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1969); Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916* (New York, 1988).

Williams would later tell a legislative investigating committee on the prowl for subversives. Asked what he taught, he said, "I teach people how to think." Not *what* to think, mind you, but *how* to think. So it seemed to us that our job was not to propagandize and make fledgling revisionists out of our students. Our job was to teach them to think *critically*—and the place to start was how to discover and question underlying assumptions. And what better place than to let them start on us—in the hope that they would eventually question the assumptions of all their teachers, all their books, all their governmental authority figures, and eventually—most importantly—all their own assumptions. We wanted students to get outside the mental boxes that they had inhabited before they entered the university.

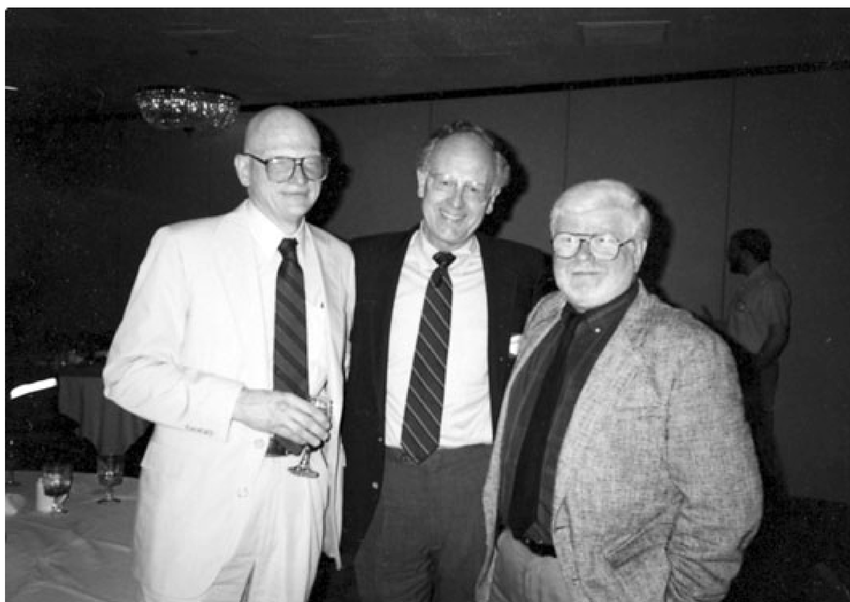
In the decades since graduate school, we have both stayed close to Walt—in three different ways. First, we stayed connected because we were imaginative and energetic in finding ways to see each other in varying combinations of twos and threes (or, when we were lucky and our wives could join us, in fours or sixes). And however social these encounters were, they always ended up in the same passionate, intellectual discussions that helped keep all of us grounded in the enthusiasms of that graduate school experience. Nancy Gardner noted one time that the conversation almost seemed to pick up at exactly the same point where it had left off six months or a year earlier. Second, we stayed close because we often worked together as collaborators. In 1973, the three of us wrote a textbook in U.S. foreign relations called *Creation of the American Empire*.[8] It proved to have a short shelf life, largely because it tried to be both a textbook and an analytical think-piece and fell between the two stools, which was unfortunate because much of it was original and first-rate. A decade later, the three of us joined Bill Williams in turning out *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, and a year later, Lloyd edited a *Festschrift* for Williams called *Redefining the Past* to which all of us contributed essays.[9] Seven years on, in 1993, Walt and Tom coedited another *Festschrift*, honoring Fred Harrington. It was entitled *Behind the Throne: Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents*, and once more, all three of us wrote essays for it.[10]

Finally, each of us remained linked to Walt because he was so generous with his time in reading and critiquing our works-in-progress. Whether it was a complete book manuscript, a shorter think-piece journal article, or a pending conference paper, Walt has been there for each of us. Moreover, the critique was unfailingly brilliant and on-the-money. (One must note that Walt was, and is, rather more reticent about his own work; one usually knows what Walt is

8. Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick, *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History* (Chicago, IL, 1973).

9. William Appleman Williams, et al., ed., *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (Garden City, NY, 1985); Lloyd C. Gardner, ed., *Redefining the Past: Essays in Honor of William Appleman Williams* (Corvallis, OR, 1986).

10. Thomas J. McCormick and Walter LaFeber, eds., *Behind the Throne: Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents, 1898–1968* (Madison, WI, 1993).



The three Wisconsin graduates (Lloyd Gardner, Walt LaFeber, Tom McCormick) meet at a conference.

working on about the same time his autographed copy of the finished product arrives at the doorstep.)

While we lack the disinterested distance to assess Walt's work over the last forty years, we do feel secure in saying a few things about both the contemporary character and the literate quality of that work. When Walt's dissertation on Grover Cleveland's Latin American policy was revised and immensely expanded to become *The New Empire*, and to win the Beveridge Prize in 1963, it was apparent that all of his books would have "contemporary" themes.[11] The forces he identifies as shaping the outlook of American policymakers in the late nineteenth century can easily be seen at work today as a later generation of leaders pursues its objectives. The average life of a scholarly book is probably twenty years or less. *The New Empire* is as popular today as when it was first published, precisely because it does speak to issues not fixed in one place, at one time. Whether these issues include the exceptionalism of American ideology, or the more easily identified economic interests behind specific policies, LaFeber takes us to the heart of the matter.

Consider some of the works that followed *New Empire*. *The Panama Canal* (1978) put the 1974–77 treaty negotiations in historical perspective, educating

11. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY, 1963).

an uninformed American public, and some of its leaders as well, to the historical realities at a time when the 1977 treaty had become a political hot potato.[12] His *Inevitable Revolutions* (1983) similarly attempted to educate the American public at the time of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua on why it was that the peoples of the Caribbean and Central America did not look at world events in the same way that leaders in Washington did, by placing the unrest in historical context.[13] In the process, he reminded his readers of the relevance of dependency theory more than a decade before antiglobalization forces would revive it. His 1993 book in the Cambridge History series, *The Search for Opportunity*, made imaginative use of Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction" to recast how we (and perhaps Walt himself) viewed the era between the end of the Civil War and World War I.[14] The prize-winning *The Clash* (1997) provided the same stimulus for understanding Japanese-American relations, offering up "the clash" over China and the "clash" of competing forms of capitalism as compelling categories for a very complex set of relations.[15] And finally, LaFeber's *Michael Jordan*, surveying the career of one of America's greatest sports heroes of the twentieth century, highlighted the dynamics underlying both "globalization" and the attacks of 11 September 2001.[16]

Besides their contemporary feel, Walt's work is noted for a lively and literate style that delights and engages university students and scholars alike. That quality is nowhere more evident than in his two immensely popular textbooks, *America, Russia, and the Cold War* and *The American Age*.[17] Both contain the same themes that he established in his monographs; indeed, he puts them forth quite clearly in the introductions and opening chapters of each textbook. (In that sense, Walt was immodest or merely wrong when he inscribed Tom's first edition copy of the Cold War book. "Here it is, Tom," he wrote, "a thousand-and-one facts in search of a thesis.") But it is the magical ability to subtly weave those themes in and out of a narrative story line that really propels those books along and keeps the reader engaged. They read like a John Dos Passos novel, yet rest on a lifetime of intense historical research.

The success of Walt's books has been of great significance to the profession of foreign relations historians. The ups and downs of the Wisconsin School's reputation in that profession read like a Hegelian dialectic. At its height in the Vietnam era of the 1960s and early 1970s, in relative decline in the Thermidorian reaction of the late 1970s and refired Cold War 1980s, it enjoyed a modest

12. Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1979).
13. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1983).
14. Walter LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865–1913* (New York, 1993).
15. Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: A History of U.S.-Japan Relations* (New York, 1997).
16. Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York, 1999, 2002).
17. Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1966* (New York, 1967); LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York, 1989).

resurgence in the 1990s when American foreign policy continued to act in much the same ways and for much the same reasons even though the Cold War was over—suggesting that with or without a Communist menace (and by extension, with or without the menace of terrorism), the dynamics of American foreign policy continue to be much the same as they were a century ago when "the new empire" was launched upon the global scene. It is more than a little ironic, of course, that many of the critiques of state-centered history (to use the broadest term about current attitudes in academia) actually have their source in works produced by scholars working in the Wisconsin tradition, turning the "consensus" notion on its end to examine the assumptions of policymakers and historians both steeped in the Grand Narrative.

Throughout those ups and downs of the Wisconsin School, no one has been more influential than Walt in both refining and keeping alive the arguments that Williams and Harrington first set forth in the 1940s and 1950s. And whether those arguments are embraced, rejected, or modified is less important than the essential fact that they be engaged and considered. That this is clearly the case in so much of our current scholarship speaks, of course, to the power of the arguments themselves; but it also speaks to the ability of Walt to be read, and read widely, both in the best of times and in the worst of times.

Probably no other historian of American foreign relations has given his profession and his readership quite the same sense that history really matters, that where we have been will indeed determine where we are going unless we understand the past—not as a template for the future, or the future as an extension of a useful past—but as a record of successes and follies. All through his career Walt LaFeber has taken seriously the Wisconsin injunction that scholarship and publication exist not simply to achieve an upward trajectory in the world of academic fame and fortune, but to serve a public interest as well.