Chapter Four

EXTENDING THE SPHERE: *THE NEW EMPIRE*

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Legions of Cornell University undergraduates remember Professor Walter LaFeber's two-semester survey of the history of US foreign relations as a treasured part of their college education.[1] As a lecturer, LaFeber was not only eloquent and clear. His style also invited students to try to understand why exploring the past could be both exciting and important. That was likewise the aim of LaFeber's written work. What many students may not have realized is just how closely interwoven what they were learning in class was with his reading, research, and writing. LaFeber believed that good scholarship and good teaching go hand-in-hand. Depending on when they took his course, Cornell students were either hearing the first-hand results of a great historian's efforts to make sense of the past, or listening to his efforts to work through, *with them*, the ideas that would be in his next book.

"Extending the sphere," a quotation from James Madison's *The Federalist, No. 10,* is familiar to any Cornellian who took Professor LaFeber's undergraduate survey.[2] LaFeber would describe the ingenious notion proffered by the "Father of the Constitution" that a republican form of government, self-regulated by checks and balances, could succeed in a large territory. Throughout the course, LaFeber referred to "extending the sphere" as a cue for his students to

consider how dilemmas over power and freedom were triggered by territorial, commercial, and overseas expansion. The question of the viability of republican institutions in the United States as it pursued its global ambitions would be fundamental to his interpretation of American history. In this chapter, we begin by addressing LaFeber's prize-winning first book, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*.[3] We then consider additional writings of his on Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, and US policymakers between the Civil War and World War I that confirm expansion as a phenomenon with deep roots in, and serious consequences for, the republic in which he lived.

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The 1950s, in America, are still mostly remembered as a decade of self-satisfied celebration. That attitude was certainly evident in much of the history that Americans were taught in those years. Students, and others, learned that theirs was a country that had over time solved --- if it had ever had --- any serious domestic problems. (The historians who argued for this view are now generally referred to as members of the "consensus school."[4]) In terms of foreign affairs, meanwhile, the United States had recently overcome a tradition of disengagement to finally embrace its destiny as a, indeed *the*, disinterested global champion of democracy and freedom. Comforting lessons of this ilk clearly appealed to a nation in the grip of a Cold War with the Soviet Union. But, even in the 1950s, there were those who thought otherwise, wondering whether such interpretations were particularly accurate or useful.

One, apparently, was Professor Robert E. Bowers, LaFeber's undergraduate mentor at Hanover College. By his own account, LaFeber decided to become a historian largely because of Bowers' thought-provoking courses on US foreign relations.[5] It was Bowers who advised LaFeber to pursue a master's degree at Stanford, where, under historian Thomas A. Bailey, he would learn to write in an accessible style. (LaFeber more than accomplished that.) But he ought then to move on to the University of Wisconsin for his doctorate. Madison, Bowers offered, was where the most significant reexaminations of the American past appeared to be under way.[6]

Indeed, they were. LaFeber later would recall that his graduate education at the University of Wisconsin was "a revelation." As Lloyd Gardner and Thomas McCormick explain in their chapter in this volume, this was due largely to the teaching of Fred Harvey Harrington (who directed LaFeber's dissertation) and William Appleman Williams (Harrington's former student for whom LaFeber was a teaching assistant). At Madison, a new generation of scholars was inspired by the progressive tradition of American historical inquiry, which called for the investigation of problems of economic and political inequality.

Years later, LaFeber remembered both the demanding standards Harrington set and how much his graduate students admired and respected the kind of scholar and teacher he had been. For them, Harrington embodied what an intellectual's role was all about. They particularly appreciated his "willingness to . . . think the unconventional, to question the accepted, and . . . to deal with the roots, transformations, and effects of power" in a nation that had become "the most powerful in history."[7] It was a model that would guide LaFeber for the rest of his career.

Harrington also shaped LaFeber's conviction that it was vitally important for Americans to examine the past in an honest and meaningful way.

Meanwhile, in his undergraduate lectures, Williams was laying out themes that would be central to his soon-to-be published *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. Building on concepts derived from progressive historians like Charles Beard and the British scholars John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, Williams suggested a decidedly new way of looking at past US interactions with other peoples. US diplomacy may have been explained in terms that sounded altruistic. Policy elites may have insisted that a leading global role had been forced upon them. But, in Williams' view, the US government had, for most of its history, actively pursued a path of self-interested expansion and aggrandizement on the world stage. And that was something that its citizens now, during increasingly dangerous times, had to grasp and confront head on. Otherwise, the country would court disaster. As LaFeber correctly commented, *Tragedy* "more than any other [book] influenced the next several generations of writers on American foreign relations."

Against what he later described as this "electric" backdrop, LaFeber decided to research the "pivotal" 1890s for his doctoral dissertation. Accepting Harrington's advice to carve out something manageable, he settled on the topic of US Latin American policy during the second Cleveland administration. As he related years later, however, he always intended to make of the project something more.[8] This he certainly did. By 1962, the dissertation had been expanded into an over 400-page study, covering the entire late 19th century. While still in manuscript form, it won the Albert J. Beveridge Prize, bestowed annually by the American Historical Association on

the most outstanding new work in American history. Not yet thirty, LaFeber had established himself as one of the most important historians of his generation.

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Quite remarkably for a book that is now sixty years old, *The New Empire* remains today the place to start for anyone interested in studying the emergence of the United States as a world power. This is not because other influential investigations of the late 19th century have not been done. In fact, LaFeber, in the preface he wrote for the 35th anniversary edition of *The New Empire*, acknowledged, and celebrated, the "extraordinary amount of work" that had appeared on the book's subjects and themes since its publication.[9] Rather, it is because the fundamentals of the new interpretive framework it presented have never been set out more cogently and have only gained in acceptance.

The immediate critical response was overwhelmingly appreciative. Upon its publication, reviewers of *The New Empire* especially liked LaFeber's effort to illuminate "a shadowy corner of the American experience." J. C. Vinson, for example, writing in the *American Historical Review*, asserted that "The theory that America was thrust by events into a position of world power it never sought must now be re-examined."[10] Given the book was overturning so much of the prevailing orthodoxy, this reception was perhaps unexpected. And, in fact, the author was himself surprised. In the preface noted above, LaFeber relates how at the meeting where the Beveridge Prize was awarded, "he saw a prominent senior American historian place his head in

his hands . . . as if he wanted to exclaim, 'Say it isn't so!' From that moment," he continues, "I feared long unfavorable reviews and a short life for the book."[11]

One quite irate attack was mounted, this, in 1978, by the naval historian James A. Field, Jr. In an article entitled "American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book," published in the *American Historical Review*, Field disparaged the idea that the United States was pursuing any new, expansionist policy at all on the world stage in the 19th century, arguing instead that historians like LaFeber, saw patterns and rationality where there was none. In Field's view, America may very well have been as "much or more the used" as the user in its international transactions."[12]

LaFeber did not believe that chapters on the 1890s were the worst in American diplomatic historiography. In response to this critique, he noted that Field echoed the analysis of Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis published forty years earlier. According to Bemis, LaFeber explained, "the grand story of American expansion rolls along until the narrative encounters 1898," which Bemis pronounced an "aberration." LaFeber pointed out, as did others, that Field made no serious effort himself even to explore, no less explain, why American policy makers took the specific steps they did during the momentous period leading up to and following the outbreak of war with Spain in 1898. For example, Field describes the explosion of the American warship, the USS *Maine*, as an accident of history, a claim, which LaFeber observes, begs "the central question of why the *Maine* was in Havana harbor in the first place."[13]

That the United States had expanded its control over territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific in the late 1890s had of course never been in dispute. Before the publication of *The New Empire*, most scholars had explicitly rejected the relevance of economic factors. The most commonly adduced explanations for the war with Spain, and the colonial expansion that followed, revolved around the impact of America's sensationalizing "yellow press," the purported inability of President William McKinley to resist an outpouring of public outrage over Spain's brutal treatment of the people of Cuba, the fortuitous presence in key government positions of a cabal of "large policy" enthusiasts (led by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts), the popularity of Social Darwinian ideas, and an alleged nation-wide "psychic crisis," a mood of unease and frustration set off by the depression of that decade.[14]

The popular "yellow press" interpretation is succinctly captured in one sentence of Henry F. Pringle's Pulitzer Prize winning *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography.* "In all probability," Pringle argued, the war with Spain "never would have come had not Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst been anxious to increase the circulation of their newspapers." As LaFeber notes in the 1998 preface, the *New York Times* continued to place a heavy emphasis on this argument in its commemoration of the war's centennial. It lives on in the classic film *Citizen Kane*, where the character Charles Foster Kane, a thinly veiled stand-in for Hearst, telegraphs his correspondent in Cuba, "You provide the prose poems, I'll provide the war."[15]

The notion that the 1890s were unrelated either to any prior developments in the nation's past or to America's foreign policy in the 20th century had appeared in the most recent treatment

of the era. In *Imperial Democracy*, Harvard historian Ernest R. May concluded that the United States "had not sought a new role in world affairs" in the 1890s, but instead "had greatness thrust upon it."[16] By the 1990s, historian Edward P. Crapol was noticing what remains the case today: scholars had come to agree that "the three decades prior to the Spanish-American War" of 1898 were "a crucial transitional phase leading to America's emergence as a major world power." Also, that the term "empire" was the correct one to describe that power.[17] These are the basic tenets of LaFeber's interpretation.

The New Empire argues that the expansion of the 1890s had roots in traditions dating back to the beginning of the country, as well, especially, to changes America had been undergoing as a result of its industrial revolution. US moves were not undertaken in a "fit of absent-mindedness."[18] They had not been driven by public opinion. McKinley was in control. He and his advisers acted with conscious intent. LaFeber refutes the waggish claim made by the Republican president that he was not even sure where the Philippine Islands were. He points out that McKinley months earlier had agreed to naval department orders directing Commodore George Dewey to attack the Philippines should war break out between the United States and Spain.[19] The book's title, finally, refers not only to the extra-continental islands acquired in the aftermath of the war with Spain, but also to what, in the author's view, would be a central preoccupation of 20th century US foreign policy, namely the establishment and protection of a commercial empire overseas.

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The approach LaFeber took in *The New Empire* would be echoed in most of his subsequent work. He did not believe an understanding of American foreign relations could be achieved simply by reading memoranda and diplomatic notes. A nation's approach to foreign affairs, he judged, had to be comprehended against the backdrop of its own internal affairs and development, its socio-economic order, and its dominant culture. Thus, LaFeber stated in the very first sentence of the preface that his goal was "to examine the crucial incubation period of the American overseas empire by relating the development of that empire to the effects of the industrial revolution." What groups, organizations, ways of doing things, and values had come to predominate in America because of this transformation? What problems did the industrial revolution bring? What "solutions" to those problems were put forward? These were among the questions he would address.

At the same time, LaFeber was unapologetic about studying carefully what historians today refer to as the "old white men" of the policy-making elite (all the better if those men had thought carefully about what they wanted to do and set down their thoughts on paper). They, after all, were the ones uniquely positioned to make key decisions about the nation's course (socioeconomic systems did not in the abstract do so). So, if war, conquest, empire, colonialism, and imperialism were important subjects to understand (and LaFeber certainly thought they were), it was futile to attempt to do so without thoroughly trying to understand the thoughts, values, and actions of such people. One thing he noted about the numerous policy makers he studied was how they often differed, one from the other, in their approaches, even while they generally shared basic goals and assumptions. Individuals, he was convinced, did matter.

The first chapter of the book, "Years of Preparation, 1860-1889," to quote LaFeber, "attempts to show the climactic decade of the 1890s can be properly understood only when placed in the context of the last half of the century." By the 1850s and 1860s, "the continental empire of which Madison, Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams had dreamed spanned North America." A "new empire," meanwhile "had started to take form." Instead of "searching for farming, mineral, or grazing lands," Americans would now be looking for "foreign markets for agricultural staples or industrial goods." Not unlike the earlier continentalism, the chapter offers, this expansionism would also come to exact "a political and often a military price." The ensuing pages of the chapter trace the country's industrialization, the dramatic shifts of wealth and power (from southern planters to northern businessmen) that occurred after the Civil War, and Americans' growing interest in "new frontiers" in the form of foreign markets and raw materials. They looked for those, LaFeber notes, particularly throughout Latin America and in East Asia.

In LaFeber's view, William Henry Seward, secretary of state under Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, loomed over the entire late-19th century period, because "his vision of empire" foreshadowed subsequent policy. To Seward, a great nation required a transportation network of canals, railroads, and overseas bases; agriculture and manufacturing; exports; cheap labor; and public land at low prices. Even if his initiatives often failed (others, of course, like the acquisition of Alaska, did not), the influential New Yorker set the agenda for the diplomatists who followed him. Interest grew over the ensuing decades in such projects as the construction of a trans-isthmian canal and the acquisition of island bases that might facilitate American activity on the other side of the Pacific.

Each from a different angle, the following three chapters lay out how overseas expansion was being thought about, discussed, and acted upon by the 1890s. Chapter two, "The Intellectual Formulation," looks at the writings of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, Protestant clergyman Josiah Strong, who advocated the spread of Christianity, "civilization," and American economic interests by what he believed to be the superior Anglo-Saxon race, and historian Brooks Adams, the grandson of John Quincy Adams and author of *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1896), which argued that the westward movement of world power based on centers of commercial exchange put the United States in position to assume global dominance. The "writings of these men typified and, in some instances, directly influenced the thought of American policy makers who created the new empire," LaFeber writes. For example, Turner's emphasis on the salutary influence of the frontier in the American past and his concern that it seemingly was now gone, reinforced for many the belief that new opportunities would have to be found abroad. Mahan's widely read books and articles, meanwhile, made the case for the acquisition of bases, the construction of a canal, and the building of a navy so that a new empire might be brought into being.

In the next two chapters, LaFeber addresses the strategic and economic "formulations" of the era. He argues, in the first of these, that, "[President] Benjamin Harrison [1889-93] and his ambitious secretary of state, James G. Blaine, formulated the strategy the builders of the new empire followed during the remainder of the 1890s." This was reflected in efforts to acquire bases in the Caribbean and mid-Pacific, promote the trans-isthmian canal, draw the countries of

South America into closer commercial relations with the United States, and, most successfully, boost construction of the sort of battleship fleet endorsed by Mahan.

The "economic formulation" chapter focuses especially on "the formation of a consensus by important political and business leaders on the necessity of a more expansive foreign policy." This, LaFeber argues, "resulted from the depression which struck the United States from 1893 to 1897." Most crucially, it reinforced in the minds of those leaders the desirability for the United States of access to markets abroad. Such outlets could even out the business cycle, thereby reducing the domestic social and political unrest that economic downturns had the capacity of generating.

The stage had been set for the United States to "extend the sphere" and pursue a much more active and assertive world role. Chapters five through eight survey the events of the middle to late 1890s and demonstrate their connection to *The New Empire's* principal thesis. LaFeber describes the Cleveland administration's confrontational approach to a dispute between Caracas and London over the boundary line between Venezuela and British Guiana. The president and Secretary of State Richard Olney were determined to demonstrate, not just to Britain, but to all the other European powers, the continued attachment of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine. Washington would treat expansion in the western hemisphere by any of them as a threat to its security, its objective being to ensure that the region was under its own "commercial and political control."

Across the Pacific, concern grew that Imperial Russia might soon challenge access by other powers to markets in China. LaFeber traces how the McKinley administration closely monitored events there even as it became increasingly preoccupied by a revolution in nearby, strategically and economically valuable, Cuba. Indeed, he argues, McKinley's determination finally to eject Spain from the island, and end the disorder there, was in no small part motivated by his desire to be free to address East Asian events.

The upshot of such thinking, of course, was a victory over Spain that provided the United States not only with an enhanced position in the Caribbean, but also with Spain's colonies of Guam and the Philippines. Congress, meanwhile, voted by joint resolution to annex Hawaii. But, LaFeber underscores, these acquisitions were not the ultimate goals. Contrary to what some previous historians believed, the islands were not taken to fulfill a colonial policy. Rather, they were identified as strongpoints and stepping stones relevant to the pursuit of a new, and much broader, albeit less formal, commercial empire in the coming century.

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In his essays and books that followed the publication of *The New Empire*, LaFeber explored the deliberate commitment by the United States to expansion. For Americans, as he points out, expansion across the continent and overseas meant the pursuit of wealth, freedom, and opportunity. It also caused big problems, including war, corruption, exploitation, desolation, and the violation of republican ideals. In his analysis of 18th and 19th century US foreign relations, LaFeber examines the many predicaments that accompanied extending the sphere.

LaFeber traces the roots of US expansionism back to the colonial era. He spells this out explicitly in "Foreign Policies of a New Nation: Franklin, Madison, and the 'Dream of a New Land to Fulfill with People in Self-Control,' 1750-1804," an essay that appeared in *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by William Appleman Williams. The title comes from a poem by Robert Frost about James Madison's "dream of a new land" where people ruled themselves. It was a dream, to be sure, that did not include all the people on land that belonged to someone else. The concept of self-determination had a muddled history, as LaFeber often noted. Although it was a cardinal principle of the American republic, self-determination played an elusive role in US foreign relations. In "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," LaFeber relates, for example, how the pursuit of a continental empire precipitated delusional invasions of Canada. When their northern neighbors refused to join them, the Americans tried to force them to do so.

The founders believed they could carry out expansion while also preserving republican virtue. The determination to expand came first. At the Albany Congress in 1754, Benjamin Franklin did not address the question whether the colonies should acquire western lands, but rather how to govern them once they were acquired. Franklin suggested the creation of a representative government of the colonies that could establish laws, collect taxes, and raise troops. As LaFeber notes, Franklin envisioned a society free of European corruption as well as people of "swarthy complexion." In the meantime, the Philadelphian, surrounded by powerful sachems and chiefs at Albany, called first and foremost for the cultivation of native friendship

and trade. Franklin made good relations with the indigenous peoples a key policy of his proposed colonial government, which he assumed someday would rule native land.[20]

Franklin's dedication to expansion inspired his virtuoso diplomacy during the American Revolution. LaFeber describes how Franklin initially objected to an alliance with France because he did not want to compromise the freedom of action of the United States. For the Americans to achieve the hoped-for conquest of Canada, the Floridas, and Bermuda, however, they would need economic and military aid. As the first accredited US minister to a foreign power, Franklin, by then in his seventies, was a star in Paris, where he deftly cultivated French support while preserving US interests. By playing off Britain and France at the peace negotiations, Franklin, along with John Adams and John Jay, scored a triumphal extension of the US border to the Mississippi River.[21]

After eking out a win in the Revolutionary War, the Americans discovered that "conquering an empire is considerably easier than governing it," writes LaFeber.[22] Britain took advantage of its commercial and naval dominance along the Atlantic coast, around the West Indies, and on the Great Lakes, while Spain closed off the port of New Orleans. Americans, mired in debt and economic depression, were divided over the conflicting agendas of northern, southern, and western states. As LaFeber liked to point out, this era, fortunately for the United States, was distinguished by having a collection of very smart people in charge. Yet even they would struggle with the competing demands of maintaining a republic or building an empire.

James Madison, in particular, studied the successes and failures of past republics. He addressed the formidable conundrum of how to construct a national government strong enough to conduct foreign relations overseas and weak enough to prevent oppression at home. The Virginian believed that individuals as well as nations were motivated by interests and passions, rather than reason. Out of these interests grew factions, the most common source of which was "the unequal distribution of property," as Madison noted in *Federalist No. 10*. The danger, he feared, was that the majority might resort to force over the minority. Rejecting the classical belief that a republic flourished only in a small state, Madison proposed that a republic could be successful "by giving such an extent to its sphere, that no common interest or passion would be likely to unite a majority of the whole number in an unjust pursuit." Factions made up of self-sufficient, property-owning, middle-class citizens, he believed, would check and balance each other, as would a system that divided power at the national level as well as between the state and federal governments.[23]

Madison's solution had its critics. The Antifederalists opposed the new constitution because they were concerned about the potential dangers of a powerful executive, a large military, unfair taxes, and the diminished authority of individual states. One eloquent critic was Madison's fellow Virginian, Patrick Henry, who preferred that power remain in the hands of strong states like his own and brandished what LaFeber refers to as a "swashbuckling attitude" toward foreign nations. Madison responded that the strengthened national government provided in the new constitution "will render us secure and happy at home," as well as "respectable abroad."[24]

Madison's dream of a people in self-control thanks to an extended sphere complemented the founding vision of continental empire. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, believed that independent, property-owning farmers were the backbone of the republic. Accordingly, those farmers and their progeny needed land. As Jefferson's secretary of state, Madison effectively maneuvered the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon Bonaparte. As LaFeber observes, however, Madison himself worried that too vast a country could cause republican institutions to crumble. Madison advised that there should be no representative government in the new territories right away because the few settlers out there were not up to the job of ruling themselves. Half the population was native and Black, while the white people, assumed by Jefferson to be the only people capable of governing the territory, included Creoles, Roman Catholics, and renegades, which he regarded with suspicion. The vaunted principle of self-determination, it seemed, was meant for some people, but not for others.[25]

In one his most memorable lectures, LaFeber used the escapades of Aaron Burr to illustrate the fragility of the extended sphere following the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. Soon after Jefferson's vice-president fatally shot Alexander Hamilton and fled New Jersey and New York, he conspired with western secessionists and Spanish agents to create a new empire in Mexico. Although Burr's plot failed and he was acquitted of treason, his scheme exposed the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the early republic as it pursued expansion. Jefferson and other national leaders fully intended to extend the nation to the Pacific, but they wanted to do so in a manner that would keep it together.[26]

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LaFeber's hero, John Quincy Adams, believed that union and liberty began at home, and that home was a continental empire. In *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (1965), LaFeber collected speeches, letters, and memoirs that traced the crusade conducted against European colonialism by "the greatest secretary of state in U.S. history."[27] He shows how Adams extended the sphere by way of the annexation of Florida, the negotiation of the Canadian boundary, and the Transcontinental Treaty. He notes that Adams was instrumental in articulating the belief expressed in the Monroe Doctrine that "the Americas were for Americans." Promulgated in 1823 by President James Monroe, the doctrine also celebrated the expansion of the United States along with its growing population, resources, and respectability. "By enlarging the basis of our system and increasing the number of States," it declared, "the system itself has been greatly strengthened."[28]

After succeeding Monroe in the White House, Adams envisioned a "civilized" continent tied together by roads, canals, and railroads. "The spirit of improvement is abroad upon the earth," said the sixth president in his first Annual Message (as the State of the Union address was then called). He urged Congress to equip a research expedition for circumnavigating the globe, establish a university, and erect an astronomical observatory. Adams despaired of his failure to establish a national system of internal improvements. He believed that the exceptional United States had a divine mission to set an example for the rest of the world to follow.[29]

A "cruel paradox" confronted John Quincy Adams, LaFeber observes. Expansion might harm as well as foster American liberty. Following his service as secretary of state and president, Adams was elected to Congress where, known as "Old Man Eloquent," he became the foremost

opponent of slavery. Adams abhorred any dismantling of the republic, but he believed that "if the Union must be dissolved, slavery is precisely the question upon which it ought to break." He stridently opposed western expansion if it brought more slave states into the nation. He supported the annexation of Oregon, but the admission of Texas, he wrote, was "the heaviest calamity." He objected to the use of force in the war with Mexico. He worried that extending the sphere beyond the continent would create a country too large to govern. He feared that intervention abroad would undermine freedom at home. LaFeber shows the contradictions in a brilliant career of espousing the expansion of a nation whose glory, Adams asserted, "is not *dominion*, but *liberty*."[30]

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In *The New Empire*, LaFeber explores the way in which policymakers grappled with this "cruel paradox" following the Civil War. President Harrison wrote, "You know I am not much of an annexationist," while stating his interest in obtaining naval bases to his secretary of state in 1891. Blaine fully agreed, listing "only three places of value enough to be taken"—Hawaii, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.[31] These few lapses were to be regarded as exceptions to American exceptionalism. The United States could still project itself as a beacon of freedom if it did not make a habit of seizing overseas possessions or ruling over people without their consent.

Walter Quentin Gresham, Grover Cleveland's secretary of state, stated his belief that a free government only could acquire territory it intended to include in the United States. His stance did not prevent him from praising the notion of his friend Carl Schurz (a German

immigrant who rose to power in the Republican Party and the US Senate) that the United States could enjoy "all sorts of commercial advantages" by negotiating for coaling stations "without taking those countries into our national household on an equal footing" and "without assuming any responsibilities for them." This happy thought, while persuasive, went unrealized. The acquisition of coaling stations, LaFeber points out, would mean "political entanglements and increased military responsibilities."[32]

The New Empire describes how thinkers, policymakers, and business executives assessed the crisis facing the nation at the end of the 19th century. For example, LaFeber cites at length an 1894 *Bankers Magazine* article that echoed Madison as it evaluated the danger of the irreconcilable factions that had brought the national government to a standstill. The symbol of our times was the destitute tramp, it said, and the ethic of our times was founded on "self-aggrandizement, power, and wealth at the expense of everybody else." One alternative to sectionalization, the article proposed, was to centralize power to allow the majority to govern without hindrance.[33]

LaFeber argues that the 1890s was the culmination of a half-century of foreign policy dedicated to commercial expansion.[34] President McKinley, he claims, was not breaking with tradition by acquiring Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines as a result of the war with Spain. He instead was using war to continue the building of a commercial empire interrupted by the crisis over slavery and the Civil War, economic depression, the Cuban Revolution, imperial competition over China, and the realignment of the great powers. LaFeber always felt there was more to do on this period. He so often suggested it to his graduate students that some of them

would respond, when asked, that their research topics were US foreign relations with colonial Southeast Asia, World War II Britain, or Cold War Latin America … and the 1890s.

LaFeber contributed to the revision of McKinley's reputation as the first modern chief executive. McKinley made his priority the revival of the economy and the restoration of confidence. "The maker must find a taker," the Ohioan said as he promoted the growth of jobs by opening markets at home and abroad.[35] His administration's foreign policy was supposed to make this happen through reciprocity treaties, a modern navy, war, annexation of territory, and the Open Door diplomacy promoted by Secretary of State John Hay. An additional feature of the new empire was an expansion of presidential powers that threatened the checks and balances system. The potential jeopardy for republican government, which LaFeber labeled the "Tocqueville Problem," is discussed in Chapter 9 of this volume.

In making his case, LaFeber focuses on the formal and informal collaboration among powerbrokers in politics and business who pursued commercial expansion. They understood that the United States was competing in an era of government-run colonization fueled by the rapid transformation of industrial technology. They sometimes failed, but they exuded confidence. LaFeber quotes New York businessman Winthrop Chanler dismissing the danger of war to Henry Cabot Lodge in 1898. If Spanish troops invaded New York, predicted Chanler, "they would all be absorbed in the population … and selling oranges before they got as far as 14th Street."[36]

In his 1998 preface to the 35th anniversary edition of *The New Empire*, LaFeber revisits his commitment to understanding policymakers as human beings of their time and place. He had found it difficult to label them, he said, eschewing terms of contemporary scholarship such as "idealists" or "isolationists." He admits that he grew to respect "the intelligence, discipline, and even courage of officials who had to deal with a terrible depression that transformed the nation's economy, society, politics, and foreign policies—and who used that transformation to make the United States one of the world's greatest powers in a very brief period of time."[37]

He continues, "They nevertheless used that transformation as an excuse to counter most important American principles, notably self-determination, and at times to commit atrocities in Hawaii, Cuba, the Philippines, Central America, and China." In *The New Empire*, LaFeber briefly and bluntly declares who paid the price for expansion. In its early decades, he writes, "the United States annexed a continental empire by undermining, economically and ideologically, British, French, Spanish, Mexican, and Indian control and taking final possession with money, bullets, or both."[38]

LaFeber describes Alfred Thayer Mahan as a man who "drank deeply of the 'White Man's Burden' elixir of his day." Articles like "The Anglo-Saxon and the World's Redemption" extolled the spread of US interests into Asia and the Americas. Not everyone was persuaded. LaFeber notes that antiimperialist Mark Twain questioned how the United States could claim to rule benevolently overseas when it had failed to make things better for oppressed minorities at home.[39]

Looking back, LaFeber took himself to task for not including more on race when he was doing his doctoral research in the 1950s and early 1960s. In his later work, he would do so more extensively and directly. In *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*, for example, LaFeber considers the resistance of indigenous people to removal from their lands and the doomed efforts of Queen Liliuokalani to preserve Hawaii from US annexation.[40] With his continued interest in the mindset of policymakers, he notes how the belief in white supremacy, as expressed in the concept of Manifest Destiny, justified expansion. Over and over, "extend the sphere" meant the exploitation of people of color.

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Roughly thirty years after the publication of *The New Empire* and, by then, several other books, LaFeber's friend, historian Warren Cohen, asked him to write the second volume of the *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations.* Published in 1993 as *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913*, this project provided LaFeber "an opportunity to rethink the 1890s and place the decade in a context running up to 1913."[41] This less well-known study does considerably more than carry the story of *The New Empire* beyond 1898. Indeed, its central thesis, about the impact of American expansion, demands more attention than it has received.

Even more broadly than *The New Empire*, *The American Search for Opportunity* plumbs major transformations in 19th century America that, in LaFeber's view, created a "springboard" for the pursuit by the United States of an overseas commercial empire. These included the reshaping of the United States into a much more consolidated nation state after the Civil War

(and, he notes, the development eventually of a much more powerful presidency). Key transformations also included the emergence of revolutionary new technologies of production and forms of corporate organization in the late 19th century (together, he labels these a Second Industrial Revolution). *The American Search for Opportunity* also says more about those Americans over whom this new political and economic complex ran roughshod as this "springboard" was being put together following the Civil War. "Root hog or die" was the predicament of many small farmers as well as those working in the mills and factories, a large share of whom were new immigrants.

The influence of racism on US foreign policy, LaFeber, argues in *The American Search for Opportunity*, was deeply rooted, pervasive, and many-sided. He describes how Senator Albert J. Beveridge advocated the acquisition of the Philippines. The Republican from Indiana raised the historical precedent of the US treatment of the indigenous people of America to justify treating Filipinos in the same way, which meant, as LaFeber points out, "killing or effectively isolating them." Ironically albeit instructively, the Beveridge Prize that LaFeber was awarded sixty years later for *The New Empire* is named for this expansionist, a longtime member of the American Historical Association and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Chief Justice John Marshall.[42]

In the 1890s, suffragists sympathized with Filipinos who faced being governed without their consent, while Elihu Root, McKinley's secretary of war, dismissed the question of voting rights for Filipinos. Root pointed to what he considered the failed Reconstruction-era experiment of granting the right to vote to Black American men. Some antiimperialists condemned such

views, especially as segregation was imposed and lynching increased. Others claimed that the United States already had enough racial trouble without taking on the Filipinos. In the end, LaFeber concludes, imperialists "assumed that if the US government had shown it could keep African Americans and Indians (and women) in their place at home without the vote, it could do the same with Filipinos."[43]

The American Search for Opportunity underscores the sheer scale of the ambition welling up in the consciousness of leading Americans by the end of the century. Americans, LaFeber writes, "set out on a quest for opportunities that destroyed order in many of the areas they targeted." The central thesis of the book relates to the impact of American activity on the economic, social, and political fabric of foreign countries. LaFeber notes how political pressure or economic penetration generally helped to generate disorder or resistance, however much US leaders were ignorant of, or in denial about, the connection. (Indeed, given their ideological blinders, they were more likely to perceive pushback as ingratitude.) As a result, people in the Americas and Asia rebelled against the appropriation of their natural resources, the destruction of their culture, the abuse of their political institutions, and the exploitation of their lives and labor. The assumption of US policymakers that they could keep such people "in their place" was to be repeatedly challenged.[44]

To illustrate the point, LaFeber devotes considerable space to analysis of the late 19th – early 20th century revolutions that took place in Cuba, Mexico, and China. Not infrequently, LaFeber points out, US officials responded to such upheavals with force. In the Dominican Republic, American capital backed sugar planters who shoved peasants off the land. To protect

the friendly government against its own angry, displaced citizens, President Theodore Roosevelt sent warships, invoked what would be known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and justified intervention in the interest of peace and justice. The United States desired no "aggrandizement," TR declared. It merely wanted "the other republics on this continent" to be "happy and prosperous." Such policies would restore order, but also inspire more rebellion, which in turn required more military action to protect commerce and pursue "opportunity." The United States emerged as the globe's leading counterrevolutionary power.[45]

Dollar diplomacy contributed to instability. This "highly dangerous" policy pursued in China and the Caribbean, explains LaFeber, was "a partnership among the government, bankers, military, and the wealthy native *comprador* elite that had integrated itself into the American system." LaFeber pointed out that Willard Straight, Cornell graduate, banker, diplomat, and publisher, called dollar diplomacy "the financial expression of John Hay's 'open door' policy." Straight was correct, as long as one remembered that the United States did not shrink from using guns when money failed to work. To protect US interests and keep Washington's chosen leader in power in Nicaragua, President William Howard Taft sent in the Marines. The "search for opportunity," concludes LaFeber, inspired revolution and justified US retaliation. In short, it "ushered in the American Century."[46]

The American Search for Opportunity explored in detail the "many unfortunate consequences" that came with the ascendancy of the United States to a global position of wealth and power introduced by LaFeber in *The New Empire*. The aim of extending the sphere in the late 19th century was to solve the problems of industrial overproduction and economic

depression. Instead, LaFeber argues, expansion served as an alternative to reform.[47] That left the problems unsolved, which justified more expansion, more military interventions, and more consolidation of power in the executive. It was back to the "cruel paradox" of John Quincy Adams. Extending the sphere might be fundamental to the existence of the republic, but it also endangered the republic.

In *The New Empire*, LaFeber dismisses the popular notion that the United States was isolationist. That was a myth, he wrote there and elsewhere. From its independence, the United States needed "an active, successful foreign policy." What American policymakers, from Benjamin Franklin on, really wanted was to avoid entanglements. As it expanded across the continent, the United States preferred to move the British or Mexicans or indigenous people out of the way. Later, policymakers searched for ways to extend US influence abroad through indirect control without commitments and constraints. In this way, the United States joined the competition among the great powers as a new kind of empire.[48]

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What if expansion, "deeply rooted in American experience," were to stop? LaFeber explores what the closing of the continental frontier meant for late 19th-century policymakers in *The New Empire*. Economic transformation led to what John Hay, riffing on the famous Gettysburg Address delivered by his former boss, President Lincoln, referred to as "government of the corporation, by the corporation, and for the corporation." The consolidation of wealth inspired distrust of authority, labor unrest, and the rise of populism, for which overseas

expansion was seen as the solution. Over a century later, the administration of President Donald Trump promoted the building of a wall as an answer to America's problems. In *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (2019), the historian Greg Grandin pronounced the wall "a monument to disenchantment."[49]

The story of "extend the sphere" is the story of the republic. LaFeber agrees with Madison that there was no daylight between foreign and domestic policy. In his books and lectures, he examines US expansion around the globe. Like another Walt, he contains multitudes.[50] He writes about intellectuals, industrialists, poets, bankers, journalists, screwballs, con men, and do-gooders. He recounts how Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan was flummoxed by the revelation that Black people in Haiti spoke French. He tells how John Quincy Adams, speaker of six languages, had years of diplomatic experience in the Netherlands, Prussia, and Russia where he became friends with Czar Alexander. With their talents and fallibilities, US policymakers wrestled with how to balance interests and ideals, or, as LaFeber frequently observes, with how to pursue interests while proclaiming ideals.

In *The New Empire*, LaFeber presents a way of analyzing history enlightening to any student. He shows us how to examine the world in which policymakers lived to find out what they understood about economics, politics, and ideas. He demonstrates how to investigate what they said and what they did. LaFeber encourages skepticism, not cynicism. Years ago, one of the authors of this essay met a LaFeber enthusiast who seemed a little embarrassed that he had become a lawyer rather than a historian. He wanted his favorite professor to know he was working on environmental protection. "Tell Walt I'm using my power for good," he insisted.

LaFeber urges us to question ourselves along with labels, long-held historical interpretations, and the pronouncements of policymakers. In teaching us how to think otherwise, he extended our sphere.

Endnotes

[1] Evoked vividly in Andrew J. Rotter and Frank Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," *Diplomatic History* 28 (November 2004): 628-30.

[2] LaFeber famously assigned *The Federalist Papers* in his survey course. For the full text of *Federalist, No. 10*, see https://guides.loc.gov>federalist-papers>text 1-10.

[3] First published in 1963, by Cornell University Press.

[4] John Higham, "Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History," *Journal of American History* 76 (September 1989):460-466.

[5] Tape Session September 2021. Among Bowers' handful of publications was "Hull, Russian Subversion, and Recognition of the U.S.S.R.," which appeared in the *Journal of American History* in December 1966, a few months before LaFeber published the first edition of *America, Russia, and the Cold War*.

[6] The following discussion of LaFeber's years in graduate school draws on the new preface he wrote for the 35th anniversary edition of *The New Empire*; Walter LaFeber, "Fred Harvey Harrington, Teacher and Friend: An Appreciation," in Thomas J. McCormick and Walter LaFeber, eds., *Behind the Throne: Servants of Power to Imperial Presidents, 1898-1968* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Lloyd C. Gardner and Thomas J. McCormick, "Walter LaFeber: the Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist," *Diplomatic History* 28 (November 2004): 613-24; and Paul M. Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 106-107. The first edition of Williams' *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* was published by Dell Publishing in 1959. On the progressive school, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, Random House, 1968). Williams discussed Beard in his essays "A Note on Charles Austin Beard's Search for a General Theory of Causation," and "Charles Austin Beard: The Intellectual as Tory-Radical," available in his *History as a Way of Learning* (New York, New Viewpoints/Franklin Watts, 1973), 172-99, 228-42.

[7] LaFeber, "Fred Harvey Harrington," 3.

[8] LaFeber, "Preface, 1998," xiii.

[9] Such work continued to proliferate. After *The New Empire* and *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901* (Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1967), by Thomas J. McCormick, another member of the "Wisconsin school," other themes and topics related to late nineteenth century American activity abroad also began to be explored as well. For a good sense of the literature overall, see the bibliographic essay in Walter LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 229-38. This second edition of Volume 2 of the Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations is the edition cited throughout this chapter with one exception in note 44.

[10] *American Historical Review* 70 (October 1964): 191-92. For other reviews, see Harold Whitman Bradley, *Journal of American History* 51 (June 1964): 94-95; Julius W. Pratt, *Pacific Historical Review* 33 (August 1964): 360-62; J. Blicksilver, *Business History Review* 38 (Autumn 1964), 398-400.

[11] LaFeber, "Preface, 1998," xi-xii.

[12] James A. Field, Jr., "AHR Forum: American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book," *American Historical Review* 83 (June 1978): 644-68.

[13] Walter LaFeber and Robert L. Beisner, "American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book: Comments," *American Historical Review* 83 (June 1978): 669-672.

[14] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 145-187.

[15] Henry F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1931, 1956), 121.

[16] Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York, Harper and Row, 1961), 269-70.

[17] The aberration thesis is discussed in Edward P. Crapol, "Coming to Terms with Empire: The Historiography of Late-Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Fall 1992): 586-90.

[18] Sir John Robert Seeley (1839-1895) used the phrase, "fit of absent-mindedness" to characterize Britain's expansion in the 19th century. The phrase was applied to US expansion by Robert Osgood in one of the most influential volumes on American foreign relations written in the previous decade, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 42.

[19] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 361.

[20] Walter LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation: Franklin, Madison, and the 'Dream of a New Land to Fulfill with People in Self-Control,' 1750-1804," in *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations* ed. William Appleman Williams (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972), 13-14.

[21] LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 18-21.

[22] LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 10.

[23] LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 25-29.

[24] LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 28.

[25] LaFeber, "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 27, 35; Walter LaFeber, "An Expansionist's Dilemma," *Constitution* 5 (Fall 1993): 4-12.

[26] Walter LaFeber, "Great Losers --- Burr," History 313 Lecture Notes, 28 September 1976, Courtesy of Douglas Little; Lloyd C. Gardner and Walter F. LaFeber, *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History* (New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1973), 72-73.

[27] Walter LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Speeches & Papers* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 24.

[28] Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home Abroad since 1750* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 81; LaFeber, John Quincy Adams, 114.

[29] LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams*, 14-15, 144.

[30] LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams*, 23-26, 46, 143, 148.

[31] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 110.

[32] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 201, 408, 412.

[33] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 184.

[34] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 285.

[35] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 331.

[36] LaFeber's focus on powerbroker collaboration anticipated the emergence of corporatism as a framework for understanding US foreign policy. On corporatism, see Thomas J. McCormick, "Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History, "*Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 318-330; LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 406.

[37] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, xvi, xxxiii.

[38] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, xvi, 2.

[39] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 16, 86, 305.

[40] LaFeber, *The American Age*, 95-97, 169.

[41] LaFeber, "Preface, 1998," xxv.

[42] LaFeber, *American Search for Opportunity*, 153, 277.

[43] LaFeber, *American Search for Opportunity*, 154-155.

[44] As discussed in Chapter 6, LaFeber investigated the consequences of US intervention in *Inevitable Revolutions.* Walter LaFeber, *"*Preface,*"* in *The American Search for Opportunity 1865-1913,* (1997 reprint), *xiii-xiv.*
[45] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, xxiv; LaFeber, *American Search for Opportunity*, 189.

[46] LaFeber used the term *comprador* to refer to local merchants and other businesspeople in the underdeveloped world whose activities largely were aligned with the interests of foreigners. LaFeber, *American Search for Opportunity*, 206-210, 223.

[47] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, xxv, xxxiii.

[48] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 2; "Foreign Policies of a New Nation," 19; LaFeber, *The American Age*, 18, 27.

[49] LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 17; Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 272.

[50] LaFeber quotes poet Walt Whitman at length in *The American Age*, including lines from Whitman's 1860 poem, "The New Empire": "I chant the new empire, grander than any before." LaFeber, *The American Age*, 88, 93, 129-130.