Confronting the Tocqueville Problem: *The Deadly Bet*

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Walter LaFeber's final book, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam and the 1968 Election*, has received far less attention than *The New Empire*, *Inevitable Revolutions,* or his other monographs. He wrote it not to impress historians and other scholars but to inform and stimulate undergraduates. This was appropriate. While LaFeber was an extraordinary scholar and mentor to many graduate students, his undergraduate teaching was legendary. For the two of us, he is best remembered as the greatest college teacher from whom we were fortunate enough to learn.[1] Yet anyone reading *The Deadly Bet* will quickly recognize that it is much more than a post-mortem on a failed presidency or a tragic war. Indeed, it is a meditation on Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 classic *Democracy in America* and a cautionary tale about the fate of "the American experiment" at the dawn of the new millennium. In this sense, The *Deadly Bet* serves as a fitting capstone to his career.

Approaching the end of his more than forty-year tenure at Cornell University, LaFeber deployed his meticulous scholarly methods and captivating expository style to provide an insightful, provocative, and yet intelligible guide to the political events of one of the pivotal years in American history. Indeed, with the benefit of more than a half a century of hindsight, 1968 exposes a nexus of forces that today threaten the very survival of the United States as a democratic nation. LaFeber could not have anticipated all the dangers that bedevil our nation in the era of the attempted coup against the US Constitution by Donald Trump and his supporters.

His history, nevertheless, gives us the tools to understand better how we Americans came to this perilous juncture in our history.

In this essay we assess LaFeber's argument that the turmoil and tragedy that defined America in 1968 was a manifestation of a deep-seated problem in US democracy that Alexis de Tocqueville identified 150 years earlier. The upheaval that the United States experienced, LaFeber writes persuasively, reflected the convergence of internal and external forces that seriously threatened America's values and institutions. We identify those forces and examine how LaFeber historicizes and contextualizes them. In addition, we explain why reading *The Deadly Bet* enhances our understanding of the precarious conditions that the United States confronts today.

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Alexis de Tocqueville observed long ago that in the conduct of foreign affairs, "democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others." Foreign policy, he lamented, requires none of the good qualities peculiar to democracy but demands the cultivation of those sorely lacking. Democracies find it "difficult to coordinate the details of a great undertaking and to fix on some plan and carry it through with determination," and have "little capacity for combining measures in secret and waiting patiently for the result."[2] LaFeber calls this phenomenon "the Tocqueville problem in American history." How, he wondered, can a "democratic republic, whose vitality rests on the pursuit of individual interests with a minimum of central governmental direction, create the necessary national consensus for the conduct of an effective, and necessarily long-term, foreign policy?"[3]

The Deadly Bet explicates, illustrates, and analyzes America's Tocqueville problem. Quick to compliment those few public intellectuals who "[took] Tocqueville seriously," most of whom he called "intelligent conservatives" like the Cornell-educated Francis Fukuyama, LaFeber spent his entire career wrestling with, and encouraging all Americans to wrestle with, the incompatibility between America's democratic ideals and the wars its elected leaders choose to fight.[4] It is a small book with a big story, and at first glance, a departure from the pattern of his publications during the previous two decades. Beginning with his history of the Panama Canal treaty, written when the nation was debating its merits during Jimmy Carter's presidency, LaFeber dedicated himself to offering readers deeply researched historical analysis of problems facing the nation at that moment in time.[5] His histories were not "presentist" in the sense that the term is often used; that is, they were not overly influenced and therefore distorted by "present" debates in the United States. Rather, his books provided pundits, policymakers, and the public alike opportunities to situate those debates in their appropriate historical context.

In *The Deadly Bet* this practice is there only by implication.[6] LaFeber sticks to the story that took place nearly four decades earlier. Yet he succeeds in providing helpful historical context not only for 2005, when the book was published and American soldiers were returning in body bags from Iraq, but also for 2023 and beyond. By doing so, as is appropriate for a book aimed at undergraduate students, *The Deadly Bet* reflects and indeed mimics the pedagogical style and techniques that attracted thousands of students—and often their friends, parents, and siblings—to his lectures. LaFeber was a storyteller par excellence. Writing in his characteristic fluid, accessible, and unpretentious style, his narratives, punctuated by deep dives into personalities and laced with anecdotes, irony, and humor, seize the readers' (and audience's)

attention even as they inform, raise questions, and provoke thinking otherwise. *The Deadly Bet* makes learning, and critical analysis, both pleasurable and unavoidable.

Because of LaFeber's expertise in and devotion to pedagogy, *The Deadly Bet's* contemporary relevance has increased over time. With racial unrest and violent crime, white supremacy, political polarization, and inequality on the rise; social and economic reform at a standstill; education and housing in crisis; Americans' confidence in their institutions and respect for their government leaders dangerously low and falling; deceit and misinformation accepted as standard and the media widely distrusted; and democracy under siege, *The Deadly Bet* provides readers with a "usable past" by locating the antecedents to the current crises in President Lyndon Johnson's failed response to the crises of his time.

Throughout the book LaFeber identifies and explores America's Tocqueville problem through the prism of the Vietnam War and the 1968 election. He uses the metaphor "hurricane" to capture the power and consequences of the war, with its protests and days of rage, carnage, and disillusionment; theatrical and tragic presidential campaigns and election; and the explosive synergy of their juxtaposition. Nineteen-sixty-eight began with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, during which the enemy briefly breached the walls of the US embassy in Saigon and took over the South Vietnamese capital. It evolved through a year marked with riots, assassinations, two chaotic presidential conventions, and the death of the hope that liberal reform could cure what ailed the nation. These forces bore down on America, LaFeber writes, "until, like an overloaded electrical circuit, the society began to explode."[7] The denouement was the election of Richard Nixon, the notorious red-baiter and Dwight D. Eisenhower's former attack-dog, as America's president. That outcome spelled doom for the Great Society and 1960s-style liberalism.[8]

"Resembling other such storms, this hurricane had causes that can be analyzed and continue to be instructive in the twenty-first century," reads the introduction.[9]

To frame the hurricane, LaFeber deploys the concept of betting. During the "1960s US presidents made a life-or-death bet that Americans could fight a long war against a determined foe and, at the same time, maintain order and protect constitutional rights in their own society," *The Deadly Bet* begins. Johnson, albeit not alone, staked his future, and that of the United States, on the un-Tocquevillian belief that the American people "had the patience, foresight, and willingness to sacrifice—and the necessary money and power to fight a vague, undeclared, unending war abroad while carrying out reforms at home." If wrong, US society "could be torn apart, and two hundred years of U.S. democracy endangered, by the war they had to fight."[10] Johnson was wrong and lost the bet, wounding US society so deeply it has yet to recover. When it comes to the state of American democracy, that wound has metastasized to potentially fatal proportions.

War, observed Tocqueville after traveling across America a century earlier, had been chosen by President Andrew Jackson as an instrument for promoting expansion, prosperity, and democracy. LaFeber repeatedly emphasizes that Johnson was following Jackson's script, and at the same cost. The French aristocrat warned that, "[A]ll those who seek to destroy the liberties of a democratic nation ought to know that war is the surest and shortest means to accomplish it." A nation, he cautioned, "[C]ouldn't put its strength into a war and keep its head level: it had never been done."[11]

"Expand or die" became what LaFeber described in his must-read *The American Age* as the "shadowy underside of American thinking."[12] It was likewise a central theme of his lectures to thousands of Cornell undergraduates. And yet war also was the shortest and simplest way to

continue America's historically unprecedented growth. This was possible—and especially tempting, because, as Tocqueville wrote, it was "[C]hiefly in foreign relations that the executive power of the nation finds occasion to exert its skill and its strength." In foreign policy, the president "possesses almost royal prerogatives."[13] And so Johnson had the tools at his disposal to make his "deadly bet."

Any number of Johnson's predecessors understood the dangers this power represented. Few, nevertheless, managed to avoid the trap. James Madison condemned war as the root of all evil—the precursor of taxes and armies and all other "instruments for hiring the many under the domination of the few."[14] Still, he led the country into a potentially ruinous war in 1812.

Abraham Lincoln did virtually everything he could to avoid civil war. LaFeber quotes him in *The American Age* warning:

> The provision of the Constitution giving the war-making power to Congress was dictated, as I understand it, by the following reasons: Kings had always been involving and impoverishing their people in wars, pretending generally, if not always, that the good of the people was the object. This our [Constitutional] convention understood to be the most oppressive of all Kingly oppressions; and they resolved to so frame the Constitution but that no one man should hold the power of bringing this oppression upon us.[15]

Yet Lincoln went to war to preserve the union, and in doing so shuttered newspapers, suspended habeas corpus, imprisoned dissidents, and otherwise wielded unprecedented executive power that challenged constitutional rule.[16]

Then there was Woodrow Wilson. LaFeber does not cite or quote Randolph Bourne in either *The Deadly Bet* or the *American Age*. Yet he was surely familiar with Bourne's writings, particularly his essay "War is the Health of the State," which prior to his succumbing to the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, Bourne intended for inclusion in his unfinished *The State*. The essayist, social critic, and public intellectual lamented that Wilson's decision to enter World War I predictably undermined American democracy. The "moment war is declared, Bourne wrote, the "mass of people" come to resemble a "herd." Through "some spiritual alchemy," they allow themselves "to be regimented, coerced, deranged in all the environments of their lives, and turned into a solid manufactory of destruction toward whatever other people may have, in the appointed scheme of things, come within the range of the Government's disapprobation." The "State" transforms into "a repository of force, determiner of law, arbiter of justice."[17]

Wilson, a scholar of the US constitution and an avowed progressive, recognized the danger. He knew that by committing America's forces and resources to a fight to make the world safe for democracy, he was putting American democracy at risk. "Once lead this people into war," Wilson famously said only hours before requesting a declaration from Congress, "and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life."[18] He too, nevertheless, chose war.

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LaFeber labeled the perception of the separation between the foreign and domestic realms in American politics as "artificial and perilous."[19] Lyndon Johnson agreed. He felt that if he did not prove himself a strong leader in Vietnam and face down the communists there, he could not expect to pass his ambitious domestic agenda on behalf of the poor whites and people of color,

for whom he saw himself as savior. He knew full well before committing himself to war that his decision could jeopardize his grandiose hopes and dreams for his presidency. Fighting a land war 8,000 miles away in a country most Americans had never heard of (and only a tiny few could even identify on a map) against an elusive enemy who never remained in one place and blended into to the same civilian population US forces allegedly sought to protect was, almost by definition, a loser's bet. LBJ nonetheless felt powerless to avoid the commitment. Terrified of the future that lay before him, he confessed to his frequent confidant and future biographer, Doris Kearns Goodwin:

> All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame the poor. . .. History provided too many cases where the sound of the bugle put an immediate end to the hopes and dreams of the best reformers: the Spanish-American War drowned the populist spirit; W.W.I. ended WW's New Freedom; WWII brought the New Deal to a close. Once the war began, then all those conservatives in Congress would use it as a weapon against the Great Society. You see, they never wanted to help the poor or the Negroes in the first place. But they were having a hard time figuring out how to make their opposition sound noble in a time of great prosperity. But the war. Oh, they'd use it to say that they were against my programs not because they were against the poor—why, they were as generous and as charitable as the best of Americans—but because we had to beat those Godless Communists and then we could worry about the homeless Americans.[20]

Johnson felt boxed in. He had convinced himself that his most deeply-felt yearnings for the country and for his own role in the history books would come to nothing if he showed weakness in Vietnam. "If I don't go in now," he admitted early on in the war, "they won't be talking about my civil rights bill, or education or beautification. No sir, they'll push Vietnam right up my ass every time. Vietnam. Vietnam. Vietnam. Right up my ass."[21]

Johnson predictably bet wrong and eventually found himself forced to forego running for a second full-term as president. LaFeber dissects the drivers of Johnson's decision to withdraw from the 1968 presidential campaign and seek an exit from Vietnam in a way that not only exposes the Tocqueville problem but also highlights the role of people, ideas, and the domestic underpinnings of US foreign policy. As with the lectures that the co-authors of this chapter recall so vividly, he organizes his narrative around portraits of bigger-than-life individuals, each of whom receives a full chapter. They are, in order, William Westmoreland, Eugene McCarthy, London Johnson, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, and the Vietnamese leader, Nguyen Van Thieu. LaFeber could have chosen different subjects. Alternatives range from anti-war leaders such as Tom Hayden and Abby Hoffman to Black Panthers such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to feminists such as Carol Hanisch and Robin Morgan, who organized an iconic protest in 1968 against the Miss American pageant in Atlantic City. But he "read his room." LaFeber did not seek to resurrect Great Man history; he exploited biography as a strategy for making the history of US foreign relations appealing and intelligible to undergraduates.

What is more, just as he did in his celebrated *New Empire*, LaFeber uses individuals to highlight and analyze the themes and dynamics he judges most vital to influencing the course of events that make up the historical moment that he sought to illuminate.[22] Among the most

important of LaFeber's themes is the role those individual personalities play in shaping historical outcomes. He appreciated the constraints and opportunities generated by broad societal and international forces. Notwithstanding the evolution of the historiography on the history of US foreign relations during LaFeber's career, and his support of its many innovations, he remained comfortable featuring individuals in his narratives. The word "bet" in his title signals that individuals make choices, and the choices one individual makes are never the identical choices another person would make in the same position or circumstance. Individuals, therefore, matter. Would John Kennedy have handled Vietnam as his successor did? Almost certainly not![23]

LaFeber positions Johnson's choice of war at the center of his narrative.[24] The choices of the other eight individuals that the book features were to varying degrees reactions to or products of Johnson's seminal one. LaFeber's primary concern, however, as was Tocqueville's, is less with the choices themselves than with the consequences of those choices for American liberty, democracy, and cohesion. In different ways each of the individuals whom LaFeber writes about either reflected or contributed to the consequences of Johnson's choosing war, and those consequences were uniformly detrimental.

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LaFeber's most constant and pervasive theme is the war's impact on America's historic problem with race. The issue was rarely absent in his scholarship; how could it be? The pursuit of white supremacy has never been far from America's simultaneous pursuit of empire. The theme emerges most prominently in his chapter on Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet it suffuses the book as LaFeber shows the many ways that Johnson's losing bet in Vietnam exacerbated America's racial fissures despite his sincere desire to improve the lives of America's Black and Hispanic populations.

The Tocqueville problem worked in reverse as well: the failure to conduct a foreign policy openly and honestly and thereby retain the democratic support of American citizens resulted in its subversion from within. Riots, counter-riots, police brutality, and a commitment to nihilist violence on almost every side of the political divide frustrated Johnson's grand dreams of a Great Society. Cities went up in flames. Across the world demonstrators burned American flags and declared their support for our enemies. The very people to whom Americans believed they were proving their "credibility" viewed the endeavor with a mixture of horror and disgust, while their adversaries found strength and opportunity in America's weakened, divided state. By the time it was over, the war caused many of the unhappy events it was designed to prevent, and then some. What's more, the period of unchallenged US economic supremacy—the astounding engine of prosperity upon which all dreams of social progress rested—was sputtering to the point of near collapse. Manufacturers were packing up and shipping jobs to places with plentiful supplies of cheap labor and few if any pollution protections. These losses put additional pressure on the lives of those who saw their own dreams for their futures going up (literally) in smoke.

Johnson had recognized that as a Southerner, appearing as a moderate on civil rights was crucial to his national aspirations. John F. Kennedy could never have selected a segregationist as his running mate. Having grown up and risen to power in a political culture that many historians call American apartheid, Johnson had to tread carefully in his support for the political rights of Black voters. As senate majority leader, he used all of his legendary political acumen to pass a civil rights bill that despite its extreme modesty few observers at the time thought possible. Johnson's commitment to civil rights grew over time, however, and soon became central to what he understood would be his legacy. Delivering his first State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, Johnson boldly declared, "This Administration today, here and now, declares

unconditional war on poverty in America."[25]

With these words, the president became his own man, no longer merely carrying out his predecessor's agenda. Five months later, speaking to students at the University of Michigan, Johnson gave one of the landmark speeches in the history of American liberalism. "For in your time," he said to the young students gathered around him, "we have the opportunity to move not only towards the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society."[26]

Here LBJ articulated a fundamental faith of 1960s liberalism: America had entered a potentially perpetual cycle of economic abundance, and that abundance could be deployed to ensure the creation of a fairer and more equal society without any segment of it being asked to endure significant sacrifice.[27] (This was yet another "bet" that was to go south on LBJ.) "Will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires?" Johnson asked the nation. "Will you in join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?"[28]

This was liberalism as a Sunday sermon, and it perfectly captured Johnson's limitless aspirations for his presidency. His decisiveness was the expression of a boldness rare in liberalism, but at the same time the hubris of his ambition begged for trouble. Amid the soaring ideals and inspirational rhetoric, LBJ and his advisors paid little attention to the potential unintended consequences of what Johnson and his administration assumed to be noble purposes. Johnson believed that America's bounty, and his now nearly limitless power, gave him not just the opportunity but also the responsibility to try to right almost all of society's wrongs. He planned to do all this while fighting a land war in far-off Southeast Asia in a country alien to most Americans.

As Tocqueville had foreseen, however, war drained and then strangled the momentum for reform and social justice. Increased unrest and violence marked the interval between the 1957 and 1964 Civil Right Acts. LaFeber recounts that, in 1963, white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith gunned down NAACP field officer Medgar Evers in his driveway outside Jackson, Mississippi. The same year Police Chief Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor turned fire hoses and snarling dogs on children marching for civil rights in Birmingham, Alabama, the same city where members of the Ku Klux Klan had bombed a Black church, murdering four young girls. Enacted in the wake of such violent and virulent racism, Johnson's Great Society civil rights legislation appeared to many Black activists as a mere band-aid, one that was further undermined by the fact that the federal government drafted a disproportionate number of young Black men to fight in Vietnam, even as the sons of wealthy and well-connected white parents sent their children, armed with student deferments, off to college and graduate school.

On March 15, 1965, Johnson addressed the nation in language that shocked and delighted even his most liberal supporters. "Their cause must be our cause, too," he said of the marchers being beaten in Alabama, Mississippi, and elsewhere, "because it is not just Negroes, but really all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."[29] Yet just five days after the bill's August 6 signing ceremony, massive riots broke out in Watts, Los Angeles, when a Black driver was pulled over by a policeman for drunk driving. Violence there, televised across the land, continued for five more days, signaling that America was not about to "overcome" just yet. Liberalism was finding itself embattled on all sides—from angry Black Americans, leftists who thought not enough was being done (and who thought liberals were too often condescending toward those they wanted to "help"), and conservatives who resisted the growth of the federal government and who wanted a firmer and

tougher reaction to the lawlessness and lack of respect for legitimate authority that they believed liberals had unleashed.

The president's contrite 1967 State of the Union address offered little to please liberals. Steven M. Gillon points out that "Only once in his 1967 State of the Union Message, a thirteen-page single-spaced text, did he refer to the Great Society." *The New York Times*'s James Reston called it a speech of "guns and margarine," a play on "guns and butter" that referred to the cost of the ever-expanding war in Vietnam and the reduced spending for domestic priorities that appeared to accompany it. (Johnson had committed nearly half a million US troops to the conflict by this time.) In LBJ's own language, that "bitch of a war" in Vietnam destroyed "the woman I really loved—the Great Society." It was Vietnam, not his support for civil rights or the Great Society, which ultimately did in Johnson. The historian Allen Matusow writes: "Vietnam cut short the rush to the Great Society, smashed his consensus, widened the credibility gap, and made him one of the most hated chief executives in a hundred years."[30]

Martin Luther King, to whom LaFeber devotes chapter four, had emerged from the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott as the leader and voice of an increasingly powerful non-violent civil rights movement. Addressing a crowd of thousands at Montgomery's Holt Street Baptist Church as both the pastor of a neighboring church and president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, King, in his soon-to-be celebrated oratorical style, had put America on notice that African Americans had lost patience with the pace of reform. There "comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression," King had warned. "There comes a time . . . when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. . . . There comes a time."[31]

King struggled long and hard before finally speaking up against the war; Johnson had

championed the cause of civil rights beyond anything King had imagined possible. Moreover, King, like Johnson, had more than enough to worry about at home. He hoped to bring his movement to the North with his Poor People's Campaign, but it was making little progress. Radical and violence-promoting challengers were growing in power and influence, and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was serving him a daily diet of harassment and torment. By 1966, though, he decided that he could keep silent no longer. He directed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, established in 1957 with King as the first president, to draft a statement protesting that the "promises of the Great Society top the casualty list of the conflict" in Vietnam.[32]

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before the day of his assassination, King announced from the pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City that the war had left America's commitment to civil rights and social justice "broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war." Johnson's policies were "taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society" and sending them "eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem." The United States, he concluded, had become "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[33]

LaFeber notes that even as King gravitated toward a more radical critique of US society, embracing not only an anti-racist agenda but also an "explosive" one based on class, young African Americans in ever-greater numbers were forsaking the reverend's commitment to non-violence. Frustrated by broken promises and trapped in a cycle of poverty, they switched their allegiance to the proponents of Black Power. LaFeber highlights Stokely Carmichael, who as national chairperson of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966 transformed the organization's name into a misnomer (in 1967 Carmichael quit SNCC and

joined the Black Panthers, embracing anti-white violence and antisemitism as well). Riots erupted in cities across the nation. Throughout *The Deadly Bet* LaFeber draws on insights provided by British Ambassador Sir Patrick Dean in reports to London that chronicle the growing fissures in the African American community and US society as the Tocqueville problem festered and intensified. "[M]oderate Negro leaders' such as King [have] lost control" of the young, Dean reported. Then, after King's assassination, Dean quoted Carmichael's description of the assassination "as the biggest mistake white America had made, and as killing all reasonable hope for the future." Carmichael went on to warn, Dean continued, that the time had arrived "for the Negro to retaliate by getting guns and carrying out executions in the street."[34]

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LaFeber argues that the disaffection of so many African Americans with Johnson and his Great Society program of reform, for which the Vietnam War was pivotal, was fundamental to the unravelling of American society and democratic order in the 1960s. Still, another major theme of *The Deadly Bet* is that the white backlash. political polarization, and attendant violence produced by this rejection was most decisive in giving rise to Tocqueville's nightmarish scenario. LaFeber assigns a chapter to George Wallace, whom, he makes clear, today's Americans must remember as more than a historical footnote. By campaigning for the presidency in 1968, Wallace became the national standard bearer not just for segregationists and white supremacists but also for those who attributed their own struggles and insecurities to perceived advances by people of color and who identified the erosion of law and order as a greater concern than either civil rights or the Vietnam War. Wallace seized on "white anger to form a political base that made him a presidential contender in 1968."[35]

While few of Wallace's supporters appreciated the relationship between the war in Vietnam and the social upheaval that they judged so threatening, LaFeber maintains that Wallace did. To be sure he does not claim that the Alabama governor, in contrast to the bookish Eugene McCarthy, read Tocqueville. Wallace was confident that faced with Black Power advocates and anti-war protestors, Americans would sacrifice their civil liberties in exchange for security. Previewing Donald Trump's campaign almost a half-century later, Wallace, according to LaFeber, posited that combining a populist program with police power was the most effective response to the Tocqueville problem. As Wallace saw it, "African Americans would probably have to surrender most of their recent gains and antiwar protesters would have to be quieted," but that was an "acceptable price to pay."[36]

That millions of Americans agreed is essential to LaFeber's narrative. Especially but not exclusively in the southern states, exacerbating Wallace voters' frustrated search for security was a concomitant belief in a zero-sum outcome that defined Black advances as White defeats. For this they blamed Johnson, LaFeber maintains. Many "whites, especially those who had less education and made low wages, believed Johnson's administration was unfairly trying to help people of color, often at the expense of whites," he writes. The perception grew progressively more pervasive, he continues, that "the riots, black nationalist demands, and growing violence in the cities had been shaped by Johnson's attempts to protect the civil rights of minorities, especially African Americans." The politically astute Johnson recognized the power and danger of this growing "white backlash." Fueled and fanned by Wallace's campaign in 1968, white fear and anger was "splitting the nation at a very critical time."[37]

In Wallace's success, LaFeber located a dystopian thread in American history presaged by the 1968 presidential campaign. Richard Nixon and his advisers, most prominently the young

conservatives Kevin Phillips and Patrick Buchanan, saw in Wallace's campaign the seeds of a "Southern strategy" that exploited racial animosity on both sides to turn the South Republican. After losing the 1958 governor's race to a more rabid segregationist, Wallace told an aide that he would never to be "out-niggered" again.[38] But as the Republican political consultant Lee Atwater would later argue, "You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract."[39]

Richard Nixon understood the need to use code words to provoke racism, so he stuck mostly to the language of "law and order." Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Mitch McConnell and almost all nationally-ambitious Republican politicians adopted this language in coded appeals to racist and racially motivated voters. Over time, the sheet dropped from their faces, and they spoke their truths. Surely Donald Trump never read *The Deadly Bet*. Still, he built on Wallace's racist rhetoric and preyed on white grievance; the Alabama segregationist and his 1968 campaign can now be seen as a prophecy of his presidency. Trump praised a murderous mob made up of neo-Nazis and Klan members and other proto-fascist "alt-right" leaders marching in Charlottesville as "very fine people," helping to lay the groundwork for the most violent attacks on police and others during Trump's coup attempt on January 6, 2021.

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These themes are central to American history, albeit sometimes only as undercurrents to the more visible parts. The intense and destructive polarization, which Tocqueville had anticipated in the 19th century, and which previewed America in the 21st century, framed the 1968 election. There are no heroes in LaFeber's account of it; he is critical of all the candidates. Yet he is sympathetic to the Democrats because of the analytic framework he constructs. All

were, to use LaFeber's word, "trapped" by the forces unleashed by the war and exploited by their Republican opponents. Johnson had bet that he could manage the war at a cost sufficiently low for him to continue to build a Great Society. Losing the bet cost him Black and White support for both the Great Society and for the war—and what's more, left no money in the budget for the enormously expensive domestic agenda he had in mind. Eventually, he just gave up, defeated by his own hubris, and walked away from the presidency.[40]

Eugene McCarthy, the most consistent opponent of the war among those covered in *The Deadly Bet* and conventionally portrayed as a loser, is to LaFeber the most conscious of and sensitive to the Tocqueville problem. "Like Tocqueville a century before, McCarthy had come to the conclusion that a long conflict undermined the nation's democratic principles—and . . . thus American freedom itself—by creating an all-powerful presidency," LaFeber explains. To McCarthy, Vietnam had turned into an "endless war that would allow that president to have even more power, while student movements took out their frustration by turning either dangerously to the left or opting out through a drug-infested counterculture." His overriding concern was Tocqueville's (and Bourne's): Finding a way to avert American democracy's corruption by a long war. His emphasis was on saving democracy, not winning the war. A decade later, McCarthy published a book comparing the current state of American democracy to what Tocqueville observed.[41]

McCarthy perceived Vietnam as integral to America's growing racial divide and inner-city rioting. The centralization of power in the executive branch and "militarization" of American life, manifest in "rising vigilantism," a "preoccupation" with "weapons of destruction," and the spread of "rifle clubs urging all civilians to be armed" were byproducts of the war. So was the proliferating drug culture. McCarthy judged "turn on, tune in, and drop out"

as a threat to democracy equal to that of the imperial presidency and the outsized influence of the military-industrial complex. LaFeber quotes extensively from McCarthy's 1968 campaign book: "For the first time since the Depression, Americans are asking whether our republic, as we know it, can survive its present course. We are not threatened with imminent attack, economic collapse, or sectional dismemberment. There is no single danger that can be precisely pinpointed. Yet all around us are signs that something is wrong." For this reason, the "peace candidate" went on, the "most important struggle for the future welfare of America is not in the jungles of Vietnam; it is in the streets and schools and tenements of our cities."[42]

McCarthy's diagnosis resonated with Americans, especially young Americans. The latter were fundamental to McCarthy's surprising showing in the New Hampshire primary, where he came within a hair of upsetting Johnson. McCarthy was better at diagnosing the Tocqueville problem than prescribing an antidote to it, however, and what he achieved in New Hampshire was not to drive Johnson from the race but help convince Robert Kennedy to enter it. By this point Kennedy had converted to full-throated opposition to the war and defined the "root" of the upheaval that it generated as a battle for the national soul.[43]

When he lost his older brother in November 1963, Robert Kennedy went on a personal journey unlike any other known American politician. He studied Greek tragedy and existential philosophy. He opened his eyes to the inner-city poor trapped in places like New York's Bedford-Stuyvesant slum, the striking farmworkers organized by César Chávez, the poverty of families in Appalachia. He became fascinated with the debates of intellectuals regarding Vietnam, civil rights, and the urban crises, and began a series of seminars in his home for himself and his political allies.[44]

It was this openness—the raising of the curtain of his otherwise sheltered world to the

voices of the poor and downcast—combined with the flashes he showed of his brother's charisma that led many liberals to believe that Kennedy alone had the potential to save the country from spinning off its axis into an abyss of nihilistic violence, social anarchy, and political reaction. Antiwar activists had been desperate for him to challenge Johnson, but he dithered, certain he'd have a better chance of winning in 1972 and concerned for his own safety. But as McCarthy was making his run for president known, RFK appeared on *Face the Nation* and ramped up his antiwar rhetoric: "Do we have the right here in the United States to say that we're going to kill tens of thousands, make millions of people, as we have, refugees, [and] kill women and children, as we have? I very seriously question whether we have the right."[45]

This period proved a kind of custom-made torture for Lyndon Johnson. He had done his utmost to live up to the promises and potential of John Kennedy's presidency, doing a better job than Kennedy himself in bringing his legislation to fruition. And now, here was Bobby Kennedy, returning not only to defeat him but also to destroy him personally and politically and taking the president's most trusted advisers with him.

Ironically, the very presence of Robert Kennedy had contributed to Johnson's conviction that he had no choice but to go full force into Vietnam. He told Doris Kearns Goodwin of his fear of what would have happened had he chosen withdrawal back in 1964: he dreamed of crowds coming at him crying, "Coward. Weakling. Traitor. . . . There would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine."[46]

Bobby heaped piles of scorn and abuse on Johnson, all to great applause. Who was responsible for the war, the riots, the dropouts, the drugs? Kennedy asked. It was not "those who

were calling for change," he cried to thunderous applause, his fists in the air. "They are the ones, the President of this United States, President Johnson, they are ones who divide us"[47] Now came Johnson's new nightmare, in which he was again being chased by "a giant stampede" and "forced over the edge by rioting blacks, demonstrating students, marching welfare mothers, squawking professors and hysterical reporters." Next came the "final straw: The thing I feared from the first day of my presidency was actually coming true. Robert Kennedy had openly announced his intention to reclaim the throne in the memory of his brother. And the American people, swayed by the magic of his name, were dancing in the streets."[48]

To an extent far beyond McCarthy, moreover, Kennedy appealed to African Americans because of what he said and who he was. For this reason, Kennedy, although forced to play catch-up with McCarthy, understood that his primary rival for the nomination was Hubert H. Humphrey, who had amassed a large lead in rounding up convention votes from individual state party bosses and organizations. Kennedy's plan, LaFeber informs his undergraduate readers, was to unite African Americans and white blue-collar workers, both of whom "knew their sons and daughters were dying in Vietnam in disproportionate numbers to the whole population," into a reconstituted New Deal coalition.[49]

Nothing demonstrates the importance of Bobby Kennedy's campaign to American liberalism—and to America itself—more than his performance on the awful night of Martin Luther King's assassination, when he gave the country perhaps its most hopeful glimpse of his potential to heal the nation as its president. Speaking to a largely Black audience in Indianapolis that had not yet heard the horrible news, Kennedy gave it to them straight. Then, in a voice cracking from emotion, he spoke extemporaneously, not only from his own broken heart but also from what felt like the broken hearts of much of humanity:

> For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond these rather difficult times. My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He once wrote: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."
>
> What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.[50]

Indianapolis was peaceful that night; few American cities were.

Kennedy's crusade could travel only so far. LaFeber writes that the "reasons why Kennedy failed to create such a coalition goes to the heart of American politics and, indeed, the nation's history." The cost of the War in Vietnam drained the resources from the populist social and economic programs required to fulfill the needs and aspirations of both Black and White Americans. In what middle and working-class Americans perceived as a zero-sum society, Kennedy's coalition fractured along racial lines. White Americans in urban areas also tended to associate Kennedy with the antiwar protests and rioting that they saw as menacing. It is possible, of course, that LaFeber's verdict was premature. Given enough time, Kennedy might have succeeded in "pull[ing] off a truly radical reform in both military and corporate policies." His

assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, deprived America and the world of that chance and maybe its last, best hope.[51]

……..

The candidate who did emerge victorious from the raucous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and the subject of *The Deadly Bet's* seventh chapter was Hubert Humphrey, the very embodiment of an American post-World War II liberalism that promoted government as the corrective to corporate greed, as a job creator, and as a provider of essential infrastructure. LaFeber labeled Humphrey a "national star." As a Minneapolis mayor running for the senate twenty years earlier, Humphrey had given one of American liberalism's most consequential speeches. Addressing the attendees of that year's Democratic Convention, he thundered, his voice pitched, his fist raised: "To those who say that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them, we are 172 years too late. To those who say that this civil rights program is an infringement of states' rights, the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the sunshine of human rights."[52] At barely more than eight minutes, it was among the shortest speeches of Humphrey's famously long-winded career—one that would eventually include twenty-six years in the Senate and four unsuccessful runs at the presidency—but it would transform the politics of civil rights in the Democratic Party forever. One would have to go as far back as William Jennings Bryan's 1896 "Cross of Gold" oration to find a single speech in the party's history that had galvanized so many people so powerfully on so central a political principle. And Humphrey's principle, unlike Bryan's, was a winner. The Democrats included the civil rights plank in the party's 1948 platform, leading to the departure of Strom Thurmond and the "Dixiecrats" who remained committed to white supremacy in the South and elsewhere.

But as Lyndon Johnson's vice-president, Humphrey in 1968 was caught in a vice grip of his boss' making. "I don't want loyalty," Johnson once told an aide. "I want him to kiss my ass in Macy's window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses."[53] Humphrey understood this, and as vice-president and presumed successor, he did his best to live up to Johnson's impossible demands. A die-hard cold warrior, Humphrey had resolutely stood by Johnson's side in waging war in Vietnam. Not only had Humphrey's anticommunism and loyalty to everything Johnson said and did wear thin by 1968, but also the president's refusal to go all in or all out on the war made Humphrey a target of the political left and as well as the right. LaFeber explains, liberals "were not used to strong, organized opposition on the left. . . . Now, under the impact of a growing antiwar movement and its belief that the Great Society program was inadequate, the left launched all-out attacks on Humphrey's liberalism on the streets and in university teach-ins." Caught in the throes of the Tocqueville problem, "Humphrey's lifelong political identity was under blistering attack."[54]

Unable to count on a shrinking liberal constituency, anathema to conservatives, and in almost all respects the odd man out in the Johnson administration, Humphrey had no choice but to suppress his doubts and support his president—as ardently on Vietnam as on the Great Society. The thousands of anti-war protestors who flooded the streets surrounding Grant Park across from the convention hall in Chicago therefore saw his first-ballot nomination as a bull sees a red flag. "All hell broke loose," LaFeber writes with typical understatement. "In his hotel room," he goes on, Humphrey watched the "Battle of Chicago, as it has been called, . . . with horror, no doubt a premonition that he was watching his chances for the presidency disappear among the clouds of tear gas." Chicago caught Humphrey in the nexus between the protracted

war in Vietnam and the breakdown of America's societal order. The Minnesotan has become "a symbol for antiwar riots on the streets."[55]

Humphrey's brand of liberalism played no better after Chicago. He was hoisted on the petard of an endless war that he had promoted; a belief in equality and opportunity with which he identified but seemed progressively more out of reach, particularly to the African Americans and other minorities that Humphrey had championed; and a safe, secure, and prosperous future that was under siege by core elements of his own political party. Humphrey confronted long odds on winning the presidency. Those odds were diminished further because he faced off against Richard Nixon.

Nixon, whom LaFeber examines in chapter 6, also benefited from Wallace's candidacy. Wallace's choice of Curtis LeMay as a running mate allowed Nixon to portray himself as the moderate alternative to Humphrey's allegedly defeatist policy. When asked at his first press conference as a candidate for vice president whether he would consider using nuclear weapons in Vietnam, LeMay, as quoted by LaFeber, replied, "I would use anything we could dream up. . . including nuclear weapons if it was necessary." Once president Nixon cultivated the image of a madman with his finger on the nuclear trigger as a negotiating tactic. During the campaign, however, it was Wallace and LeMay whom journalists dubbed the "bombsy twins."[56]

Nixon, counterintuitively with an assist from Wallace, adroitly exploited Humphrey's vulnerabilities. He did not need to disclose his "secret plan" to achieve a "peace with honor" in Vietnam because Humphrey could propose no plan that could avoid bringing down upon him the wrath of Lyndon Johnson. LaFeber points out that Humphrey's motivation for supporting the war so enthusiastically in 1968 was to "return to Johnson's good graces" after angering him earlier by "gently" suggesting the administration pursue a negotiated settlement--Johnson's

policy after he withdrew from the race himself. Making matters worse, Nixon was able to turn the tables on Humphrey's effort to "smoke out" his secret plan. In September Humphrey pledged that once elected he would "move toward a systematic reduction in American forces" whether or not Nguyen Van Thieu's South Vietnamese government consented to join the Paris peace negotiations. Nixon immediately scored political points by labeling Humphrey's pledge a "turn and tail policy" that would preclude achieving the honorable peace that polls showed most Americans wanted. Johnson could have offered Humphrey cover; he did not.[57]

Despite all this, Humphrey had a strong chance to win at the end. Nixon had been polling comfortably ahead Humphrey, but the gap was closing, from fifteen points in September down to just two right before the election. The announcement of a Vietnam peace deal would likely have sealed Humphrey's election. Johnson had already announced a partial halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and was pursuing peace talks in Paris aggressively. Henry Kissinger sabotaged his effort. Nixon's future secretary of state, whom the Johnson team had trusted as an adviser to the talks, secretly leaked their contents to the Nixon campaign. Seeking, in Nixon's words, to "monkey wrench" any potential deal, the Nixon campaign enlisted Anna Chennault, a well-connected Republican socialite and fundraiser, to pass a message to Bui Diem, South Vietnam's ambassador to the United States. Chennault told the South Vietnamese, "Hold on. We are gonna win." When Johnson learned of Chennault's efforts via surveillance by the FBI and the National Security Agency, he called Senator Minority Leader Everett Dirksen in a fury: "It's despicable," he said. "We could stop the killing out there . . . . But they've got this…new formula put in there—namely, wait on Nixon. And they're killing four or five hundred every day waiting on Nixon." He then added, "I'm reading their hand, Everett . . . . This is treason." The Republican Dirksen agreed.[58]

The day before the election, Johnson called in the members of his national security team to help him decide whether to go public with Nixon's subterfuge. Just as Barack Obama would choose to keep quiet about Russian interference in the presidential election of 2016, LBJ and his advisers chose not to risk appearing to throw the election. What's more, Johnson was hardly eager to reveal his own illegal domestic spying. Finally, it is far from clear that Johnson preferred a Humphrey victory to a Nixon one, because, ironically, he thought Nixon, the "peace candidate," less likely to give up on Vietnam than his own vice president. So the plot worked: South Vietnam boycotted the talks, which killed Humphrey's momentum and ensured Nixon's paper-thin electoral victory.[59]

LaFeber, accordingly, makes explicit that while Tocqueville may not have predicted Nixon's victory, he would not have been surprised by it.[60] Nor would the French aristocrat have been shocked by the fallout from the 9/11 attacks thirty-three years later. Not long after Al-Qaeda terrorists blasted the Pentagon and destroyed Manhattan's Twin Towers, the master historian returned to his time-honored theme of America's confrontation with the Tocqueville problem in order to make sense of where the nation stood as its leaders chose a path for its military response. "The trade-off of military needs, if this New War is to be successfully waged, against the requirement that Americans become associated with highly undemocratic, militaristic, even medieval, regimes," LaFeber insisted, "will have to be explained and debated. Likewise, the "tradeoff of internal security against the restriction of civil liberties (that panoply of liberties for which the war is allegedly being fought) will have to be explained and debated." And finally, the "simultaneous waging of the war against terrorism while carefully considering how Americans should think about other foreign policy problems, such as a rapidly changing China and an increasingly unstable Latin America, has to be explained and debated." LaFeber

concluded with elegant simplicity, “Doing all this simultaneously challenges the Tocqueville problem with a dangerous overload.”[61]

Under George W. Bush’s presidency, America failed LaFeber’s Tocqueville test no less spectacularly than it had under Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon in Vietnam; even more shamefully, perhaps, because it should have heeded the lessons of its previous misadventure. Then again, learning from the mistakes of the past, and applying appropriate lessons in the future, occurs with far greater frequency in the work of scholars—particularly careful, meticulous historians like Walter LaFeber—than in the policymaking of American politicians. It is for that reason, sadly that were he to have authored *The Deadly Bet* in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s 2016 election, his update of the original would have demanded only minor revisions. As he so aptly notes in the final sentence of this short, masterful study: “The Ghosts survived.”[62]

Endnotes

[1] Andrew J. Rotter and Frank Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," *Diplomatic History* 28 (November 2004): 625-35.

[2]Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co, 1969), 228-229.

[3]Walter LaFeber, "Jefferson and American Foreign Policy," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 376-377.

[4] Walt LaFeber to David Maisel, August 22, 1995, Maisel papers.

[5] Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978). LaFeber followed *The Panama Canal* with *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (NY: Norton, 1983).

[6] Depending on the context and platform, LaFeber could be more direct. In a speech delivered in 1970 at Cornell University's Bailey Hall, where for years he taught a survey of the history of US foreign policy to hundreds and hundreds of undergraduates, LaFeber explicitly applied Tocqueville's warning to support the [George] McGovern-[Mark] Hatfield Amendment that called for the withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam. Walter LaFeber, Speech Delivered at Cornell University's Bailey Hall, May 12, 1970 (revised and expanded, May 16, 1970), authors' possession. We thank James Siekmeier for providing us with a copy of this speech's transcript.

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[9] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 1.

[10] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet,* 1, 5.

[11] Henry Steele Commager, *Commager on Tocqueville* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 56; and LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 15.

[12] Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989), 92. See also chapter 4 in this volume.

[13] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 126. LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 15.

[14] LaFeber, *The American Age,* 58.

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[19]Walter LaFeber, "The Constitution and United States Foreign Policy: An Interpretation," *Journal of American History* 74 (December 1987): 696

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1976), 264.

[21] David Halberstam, "LBJ and Presidential Machismo," in Jeffrey Kimball, *To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 201.

[22] Walter F. LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion. 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 25th Anniversary Edition, 1998).

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