

***With a Bow to Walter LaFeber,
“What Then Can We Say in Conclusion?”***

The constancy of America’s Tocqueville problem described by Walter LaFeber continues to haunt the makers of US foreign policy. The chapters dedicated to him in this volume illustrate the degree to which his teaching and scholarship provided both students and readers with the essential tools needed to historicize—and thereby better understand—the present. As his tough-minded, thoughtful, and accessible scholarship consistently demonstrated, the present echoes the past even if it does not repeat it. Moreover, the past informs the present even if it does not predetermine it.

Central to LaFeber’s understanding of the Tocqueville problem was the viability and sustainability of the American experiment in what has proven to be an uneasy combination of liberalism, democracy, republicanism, and of course, capitalism. Writing early in the 1800s, Tocqueville was not pessimistic about America’s future, and neither was Walter LaFeber writing one-hundred-fifty years later. Both men, however, understood that reconciling the individualism and the decentralization that were foundational to the birth of the United States posed a severe challenge to fashioning and conducting successful foreign policies.

As LaFeber would repeatedly note, James Madison’s Federalist No. 10 foreshadowed the degree to which effective and coherent foreign policies would be crucial to meeting the challenge of America’s Tocqueville problem. By “extending the sphere,” Americans could best accommodate the multiplicity of individual interests and thereby bolster a pluralistic society even as it mitigated against the tyranny of the majority and the over centralization of political, economic, and cultural power. “Extending the sphere” need not demand either continental or overseas expansion, but in America’s case, it could—and did—lead to both.

The chapters of *Thinking Otherwise* fit together to produce a troubling record of America's involvement in world affairs. Wars with Britain and Mexico pushed the boundaries of the continental United States to the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. This expansion provided opportunities for the incorporation of large swaths of territory in Central and South America and Mexico to the south and Asia and the Pacific to the west into the US sphere. By the end of the 19th century, America had risen to global prominence. By the middle of the 20th, prominence had become predominance. At the dawn of the new millennium, the United States had become the liberal global order's foremost advocate and greatest beneficiary. Once America emerged as a world power, US policymakers subordinated territorial conquest to increasing trade and investment, securing access to natural resources, and cultivating acquiescent foreign leadership. They usually regarded armed intervention as a last resort, but over time they adapted to new challenges at home and abroad by developing different means to achieve their goals.

Even so, US presidents found numerous occasions to deploy force to serve what they believed, often incorrectly, to be America's global interests. The war with Britain in 1812, the war with Mexico in 1848, and most notably, the war with Spain in 1898 and its corollary in the Philippines, would prove pivotal to LaFeber's conception of the "New Empire." His subsequent books encompassed World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. He is most renowned for writing about a different kind of war, the Cold War, a fifty-year ideological conflict. Integral to that war were shadow wars, covert and paramilitary operations that the United States initiated across the globe; Iran, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, the Congo, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and most recently Afghanistan are among the best-known, but the list continues well beyond these examples. Whether cold or hot, shadow or overt, these

wars required ever increasing appropriations for defense that over time contributed to a bloated federal budget and an ever more powerful executive branch.

The root of the Tocqueville problem was the undeniable connection between the high cost—whether measured in blood or treasure—of America’s foreign adventures and the existential damage those adventures inflicted on America’s domestic institutions, its unity of purpose, its impulses for reform, and, eventually, its democratic bona fides. This “cruel paradox”¹ explains why the quest for security produced greater insecurity, and why Tocqueville’s dilemma suffused LaFeber’s lectures and his scholarship. That is evident in the texts and the titles of the chapters in *Thinking Otherwise*: “Extending the Sphere,” “Reconstructing the Backstory,” “Thinking about Democracy,” “Turning to Asia,” “Demystifying Global Capitalism,” and most explicitly, “Confronting the Tocqueville Problem.”

In his final book, LaFeber observed that 1968’s political protests, racial upheaval and violence, white backlash and polarization, political assassinations, and the demagoguery, disillusion, and despair that attended the escalation of the Vietnam War manifested not only America’s inability to resolve the Tocqueville problem but also its refusal to acknowledge it. When *The Deadly Bet* came out in 2005, it was not as common to refer to “endless war” as it would be a decade later, yet LaFeber used the phrase early in the book.² There can be little doubt that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were very much on his mind because he wrote and spoke about both.³

LaFeber spelled out the catastrophic consequences of the Iraq War in an email to Andrew Tisch in August 2008, four months before President George W. Bush announced his timetable for US withdrawal. “In my view, the invasion of Iraq turned out to be the greatest disaster in U.S. diplomacy and warfare in the last half-century, at least. It was worse than Vietnam because

when we went in and pulled out of Vietnam, it made little difference in the balance of power.” Regime change in Iraq, LaFeber concluded grimly, “has allowed the rise of a nuclearized Iran” and “weakened the US military to the point that Putin can humiliate both Georgia and the United States with impunity” while making Bush and his national security team “significantly less effective in handling problems in Latin America, Central Asia,” and even with “our one-time allies in Western Europe.”⁴

By the time that President Joe Biden finally withdrew US forces from Afghanistan thirteen years later, Russia had gone to war with Georgia and conquered Crimea. Then, two years into Biden’s presidency, Russia launched a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine’s reliance on the United States for support—arms, munitions, missiles, tanks, aircraft, intelligence, lots and lots of money, and more—is so extensive that its war with Russia threatens to turn into another endless war. Moreover, as Sino-American competition steadily intensifies, the United States risks being drawn into a direct military conflict with China over Taiwan and the South China Sea. The nuclear arms race and nuclear blackmail have both resurfaced. Yet even these worrisome challenges pale in comparison to that of climate change. For this the “great powers,” none more so than the United States, are primarily responsible. They are, however, loathe to take measures beyond palliative ones as we march, Zombie-like, toward climate-led catastrophe.

For the United States, the domestic repercussions of these external shocks could eclipse those of 1968. With inequality having reached such historic proportions that it now mirrors the “gilded age” that LaFeber exposed in *The Search for Opportunity*, avenues for social mobility—the backbone of the so-called “American Dream”—disappear into the ether. America’s middle-class is shrinking. Meanwhile, white supremacist and neo-Nazi organizations with names such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, supported and enabled by mainstream leaders of a Republican

Party refashioned in the image of Donald Trump, roam the land, threatening people of color, LGBTQ folk, immigrants, Jews and Muslims, anyone really, whom they deem insufficiently white, Christian, and conservative.

Lies and disinformation up to and including incitements to mass violence proliferate across countless media platforms as profitability and hyper-partisanship define the so-called MAGA movement to the point where honest debate over means and ends becomes impossible and historic trade-offs go not merely unresolved but also undiscussed. The massive US defense budget—larger than that of the next 10 countries combined--remains sacrosanct. Meanwhile, opioid and heroin addiction at home has destroyed entire communities, Black and white. That Americans have understandably lost faith—and patience—in once hallowed institutions like the Supreme Court as well as the other branches of government demonstrate what may prove to be an irreversible deterioration of political culture. Transparency and openness have given way to purloined archives, book banning, censorship, and naked bribery. Military officers become paid lobbyists for US adversaries, elected officials fabricate their entire biographies, and Supreme Court justices accept extravagant vacations as gifts.

Defeated in his campaign for reelection in 2020, former president Donald J. Trump incited an insurrection aimed at subverting the Constitution and denying the presidency to the victorious Joe Biden. As Trump, despite facing legal jeopardy, including federal indictments, far more severe than any previous president in in US history, prepares to square off against Biden again in 2024, believers in his “Big Lie” remain his core constituency and the media continue to fear holding him and his supporters accountable. Will Trump be tempted to make an even deadlier bet than LBJ made in 1968 or than he himself made on January 6, 2021? Win or lose, the man in the red MAGA baseball cap and his tens of millions of devoted followers represent a

threat to American democracy more serious than any it has faced since the South started pounding Fort Sumter.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, LaFeber had a premonition that the deadly bet that George W. Bush had made with his “global war on terrorism” might eventually make Tocqueville’s ghost shudder. Always attentive to the irony of American history and the tragedy of American diplomacy yet appreciative of the potential humor in the story, LaFeber was a lifelong theatergoer. Following the Taliban’s defeat by US forces in late 2001, he recalled the prophetic words of one of America’s greatest playwrights. “Arthur Miller once reformulated the Tocqueville problem by remarking that Americans respond to a call for righteousness if they mistake it for a call to lunch,” LaFeber quipped. “The New War will be an ultimate test of Miller’s skepticism, and one hopes he is wrong. Meanwhile, it might also be remembered that in the hard power world of international affairs and terrorism, there is no free lunch.”⁵

Walter LaFeber was a gentle soul and a mild-mannered teacher-scholar, but he possessed a contrarian streak. During his valedictory lecture at the Beacon Theater in April 2006, he recalled a story about the 19th century British philosopher Samuel Butler. At a London dinner party, a wealthy dowager once asked Butler: “Why does God tolerate historians?” Butler thought for a moment and then replied: “Well, you see Madam, it is because since God himself cannot change the past, he is obliged to tolerate historians who can.”⁶

Our mentor devoted his entire career to seeking, uncovering, and disseminating new insights into the past. Over and over again, he encouraged us to challenge conventional wisdom and to think otherwise. He taught us to recognize the signs of the Tocqueville problem and to utilize our historical sensibilities to address it. He showed us that scholarship is a powerful tool with the potential to contribute to the public good. Most important, he reminded us that while

there is no free lunch, there is also no giving up. That is Walter LaFeber's legacy to us, the contributors to this volume, and, we hope, to its readers as well.

Endnotes

¹ On LaFeber's identification of the cruel paradox, see chapter 4, p.78 (of current manuscript)

² LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 38.

³ Examples include Walter LaFeber, "The Bush Doctrine," *Diplomatic History* 26 (Fall 2002): 543-558; and "The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (Spring 2009): 71-93.

⁴ LaFeber email to Andrew Tisch, August 20, 2008.

⁵ Walter LaFeber, "Tocqueville, Powell, Miller, and September 11," *Historically Speaking* 3 (November 2001): 10.

⁶ Walter LaFeber, "A Half-Century of Friends, Foreign Policy, and Great Losers," April 26, 2006, <https://www.cornell.edu/video/walter-lafeber-beacon-theatre-2006>.