About the Contributors

Tribute volumes like this one usually begin with an "About the Contributors" section in which the authors regale readers with their own scholarly accomplishments. Walter LaFeber was not a fan of the sort of thing, nor are we. What follows, with a bow to Walt, are our favorite stories about our friendship with a teacher, scholar, and mentor unlike any other. Some are funny and some are serious, but all of them reveal what a remarkable human being he was.

Eric Alterman
Professor of English, CUNY-Brooklyn College
Cornell BA 1982

Three Cheers for AP History

I'm sorry I don't remember my first encounter with Walter LaFeber. What I do remember is that I had a terrific team-taught AP history class in high school. And the teacher who played the conservative--who was a bit conservative--Werner Feig--had a real bee in his metaphorical bonnet about this Cornell professor named "Walter LaFeber," whom he considered, for debating purposes, to be a Communist. The more I heard Mr. Feig attack him, the more I thought it made sense for me to search out the guy and maybe study with him.

I married the girl who was my girlfriend in that AP history class and she followed me to Cornell, transferring from Oberlin, but did so the semester I spent abroad at Tel Aviv University. It was the second semester of my sophomore year, and so I had taken 313 in Bailey Hall but I would not be able to take 314 for a whole year when I returned. This wonderful woman, my ex-wife, went to every lecture that semester lugging a cassette tape recorder and saved them all for me to listen to upon my return, which of course I did. I was that much of a nerd.

I did an independent study with Walt upon my return about the arguments that the pundits Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop had about Vietnam. I chose this topic because my now ex-wife bought me Ronald Steel's *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* for my birthday that year. The next year, Walt wrote me a recommendation to be Cornell's nominee for the Carnegie Endowment internship in Washington, which I got, and I became friends with Ron, who was a fellow there--and passed away in early 2023. Walt and he were friends and Walt had told him of my paper, but I refused to show it to Ron when I got to Carnegie because in the comments, Walt said he thought I leaned a little too heavily on Steel's research and could have done more of my own. I wrote my first book, a history of punditry called *Sound & Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* published in 1992, based in part on that paper. I published my 12th book, *We Are Not One: A History of America's Fight Over Israe*l, thirty years later, using some of the research I did for the senior honors thesis I did for Walt. I hope he would have felt by then I had learned how to do my own research, but I can't say I'm confident that, at least in terms of the example of his scholarship, that it would be true.

Susan A. Brewer
Professor of History Emerita, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Cornell PhD 1991

On Training

After completing a master's degree in international history at the London School of Economics, I knew I wanted to learn more about how Americans saw themselves in the world and why, but not what to do about it. In London, I had been exposed to the attitude that the British had done a decent job of running the world and now the Americans were messing it up. Although I saw some justification for this point of view, when I, as "the American," was asked to explain the Reagan administration's claim that the United States could fight and win a nuclear war, I felt I still had more questions than answers.

I returned without funds to Ithaca and because my mother worked at Cornell, I was eligible for tuition coverage. I got jobs at J. C. Penney and the YMCA and audited two classes, one on US cultural history and one on the history of US foreign relations. When I heard Professor LaFeber discuss Walt Whitman and Reinhold Niebuhr as well as American clipper ships sailing the Pacific and Cold War strategies, I thought here was a place for me.

So, I presented myself to Professor LaFeber after waiting in line on the fourth floor of McGraw Hall during his office hours. He politely made it clear he did not want me. He was not taking graduate students, he said. Looking back, I realize I probably resembled a stray puppy gazing hopefully at him. He unbent a little. He said, "You will have to be retrained." I nodded. It was worse than he knew because I had no idea what he was talking about. I did not know what it meant to be trained and certainly did not feel I had been. He put me on trial. I had to do a research paper for him, ace the GREs, and be accepted into the graduate school. I undertook these tasks, which was my way of refusing to go away. In the end, he gave me a home. It wasn't always a good fit, because I was difficult to train, but he was kind as well as demanding.

When I was offered a job at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Walt was pleased, pronounced it "a return to Wisconsin," and then said you will defend your dissertation (at the time far from finished) before you go. I did, but it wasn't pretty. In the years that followed, he remained a generous mentor who took his pencil to my manuscripts of *To Win the Peace* and *Why America Fights*. In his correspondence, Walt often mentioned the activities and accomplishments of his students, but rarely his own. Instead, a package would arrive with an inscribed copy of his latest book. I see now how he was connecting us, his strays and stars, into a community of scholars, who, each in his or her own way, had joined the quest to discover what this American experiment is all about.

Frank Costigliola
Professor of History, University of Connecticut
Cornell PhD 1972

The Summer of '68

Walt LaFeber rejected my application to graduate school – and with good reason. As a senior history major at nearby Hamilton College, I had ventured to Ithaca for an interview with Professor LaFeber on March 15, 1968. Coincidentally, that was a month to the day after Walt and Lloyd Gardner had bested Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., George F. Kennan, and other skeptics of revisionist Cold War history at a seminar held at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Understandably, I knew nothing about Walt's and Lloyd's achievement. Nor would I necessarily have been impressed, since I had only vague notions about who Schlesinger and Kennan were. And if someone at that point had asked me what I thought of "William Appleman Williams," I might have replied that while I had no idea who he was, his name seemed rather redundant. Maybe Walt did ask me about Williams in that interview; I do not recall. In any case, he turned down my application.

There followed the bleak summer of 1968. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. Fervent hopes for political change yielded only the grim choice of presidential candidates Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, and George Wallace. The meat grinder in Vietnam was chewing up G Is my age. Draft calls were rising. My local draft board had turned down my application for conscientious objector (CO) status. Though I had appealed to the state draft board, I had little reason for optimism. I was determined to refuse induction into the military even if that meant going to prison. Amidst these dire prospects, I ventured a Hail Mary pass. In late August, I wrote to Walt, asking if perhaps the draft had thinned the ranks of the incoming graduate class and, if so, there might now be an opening. My life then changed. Walt wrote back to say I could come to Cornell, but without any funding. I would have to pay tuition and all living expenses. I grabbed this life line.

That first semester was intense. My seminar with Walt had just one other student and met at his house. Every two weeks we read 5-8 books plus primary sources and wrote a paper. I began to grasp the magnitude of what I did not know. Amidst this discovery, Walt never made me feel stupid. I got an A in the seminar. He then used his pull so that I received full, indeed generous, funding for my remaining time three and a half years at Cornell. I finished my PhD with money in the bank. Meanwhile, the state draft board approved my CO application.

In the fifty-three years between that first year at Cornell and the passing of Walt, he remained a central figure in my life. He enabled my career as a scholar and teacher. He remained an inspiration. Our relationship was symbolized by our periodic five- or six-hour luncheons, fueled by coffee and wine, at which we would discuss people, history, and politics. I wish that he could have read my book on Kennan. Going forward, trying to understand what made Walt the person he was has become my intellectual focus.

Jeffrey A. Engel
Professor of History, Southern Methodist University
Cornell BA 1995

God Called

In the pre-modern days before voice mail, roommates took messages. Whenever Walter LaFeber phoned, mine would write: "God called." Such was his campus-wide reputation. None of the engineers and hotellies who also lived at 214 College Avenue in the summer of 1993 ever took his courses. But even those obsessed with formulas and recipes knew this professor was different, as was his role in my life, which extended beyond directing my honors thesis to selecting each semester's courses. History wasn't the only thing Walt thought worth studying, though his ecumenism had limits. I only won his grudging consent for taking the Hotel School's wines course my senior year by giving him two American literature courses in exchange.

The Walt I knew was at the tail end of his career, experienced enough to excel at what an adviser does most: he gave great advice. Thirty years after I first walked into his office as a Cornell freshman, his words echo throughout my own conversations with students. "If you get 5% of what you apply for, you'll have a brilliant academic career," he once consoled when an application failed. Similar advice kept me in graduate school, when temporary insanity prompted by frustration with American politics prompted a brief enthusiasm for coupling my PhD in history with a concurrent law degree. I shudder at the thought today, but Walt rode to the rescue. "Doing multiple things at once rarely produces the best results," his he advised. Go to law school if you must, but only after finishing what you've started. I imagine he already knew that years of dissertation work would extinguish any short-term enthusiasm for the law.

So, I stayed. At the University of Wisconsin, a school chosen in brazen hope of joining Madison's long line of distinguished historians, and frankly, because Walt said it was the place to go (and Tom McCormick the man to work with next). Graduation's approach nonetheless prompted second-thoughts. "Was Wisconsin good enough?" I asked. Cursory review of prestigious departments, Cornell's included, suggested most faculty came from prestigious private universities. Walt paused, the gleam in his eye signaling that he was about to enjoy the advice to come next. "Well," he said. "It worked for me."

I never regretted the choice, nor doubted that the most important decision of my academic career was that freshman visit to his office. In which, in retrospect, he showed not only how an adviser should be selected, but something of equal importance yet far less frequently discussed: how a mentor should choose a mentee. Because I was Cold War curious and wielded rudimentary French, he told me to read five or six books on Franco-American relations (including some guy with a weird Italian name: 'Costigli-something?'), and return to discuss. Few over-zealous undergraduates ever returned for a second conversation, I later learned, but his method imparted another piece of advice I try to follow to this day: give everyone a chance, and spend time with those who come back for more. I'm ever so glad he did both.

Anne Foster
Professor of History, Indiana State University
Cornell PhD 1995

It's the Little Things

As I think about all the Walt stories I could tell, I remember more the passing comments, brief bits of advice, and habits he had rather than any single anecdote. At our very first meeting, after I had arrived at Cornell in the fall of 1988 to do my PhD under his direction, he asked me what I wanted to write my dissertation on! As he said then (and many times subsequently), "you are only in graduate school to get out of graduate school." A healthy reminder that the PhD is training to allow you to be a historian, not an end in itself. Shortly after that first meeting, he also began asking me at nearly every meeting, to state my argument in one sentence. I tried to comply, initially using spoken semi-colons in a desperate bid to include all my unruly thoughts. Today, I ask my graduate students the same question nearly every time we meet.

I remember that he (im)patiently edited every split modifier and dangling participle. I learned better how to edit my own work in a bid to not see those circles on the page. Even though Walt taught hundreds of students each semester in the US foreign relations survey, he taught the voluntary section meeting rather than assigning that to us, his graduate assistants. I remember that we were all amazed that only a couple dozen showed up to meet with him. As his graduate assistants, our main responsibility was to grade. Whenever a student had a complaint, if the student wanted Walt to look over our work, Walt asked the student to write about what they thought we had gotten wrong. Then Walt typed, on a page from a yellow legal pad, an explanation for why that student was fortunate to have gotten as good a grade as they did. But at the end of the semester, when we met to assign final grades, Walt was often the one arguing to raise students' grades.

As I prepared my first attempt at an article for submission, I included caveats about languages I didn't speak, archives I hadn't visited. Walt advised me to boldly claim the value of what I had done rather than allow people to think about what I had not. I hear his voice in my head all the time when writing. When I finished my PhD, and was interviewing for jobs, Walt gave only as much advice as I asked for, which wasn't much. I do remember that he was more consistently supportive than any other Cornell faculty of my desire to find a job that fit with how I wanted to live my life rather than the most prestigious job. Each of these little comments, observations, bits of advice lives on in how I teach, write, and navigate my career.

Lloyd C. Gardner
Professor of History Emeritus, Rutgers University
University of Wisconsin-Madison PhD 1960

A Night to Remember

Walt LaFeber, Tom McCormick, and I became lifelong friends while in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, "Ground Zero" for Cold War revisionism during the late 1950s. Our second year at Madison was the first year of Bill Williams' long tenure in the History Department. It may have been Fred Harrington's hand behind the scenes, I don't know. But Walt and Tom and I were all assigned to be his teaching assistants. Tom was an assistant in his seminar course and Walt and I were assigned to the foreign policy survey. The principal textbook was *The Shaping of American Diplomacy.* Very soon, attending these lectures with our own notepads open as we wrote furiously, we found students coming up after class to ask us to explain what they were hearing. It was pretty embarrassing to admit we did not know.

Talking together, we decided on a bold step: We would ask Bill and his wife, Corrine, to dinner at Walt and Sandy's apartment in downtown Madison. It turned out to be, as they say, a night to remember. It was that experience that we talked about the rest of our lives. Bill gave an evening seminar like none other. It drew on so many threads to put American foreign policy into a coherent picture. It was an exploration of how policymakers made sense out of the world, not determinism, and beyond the action-reaction interpretations that had reigned supreme until those years. Over the course of my talking with colleagues, I have never met anyone whose graduate school experience included such an event. But more important, we no longer felt unable to answer our students' questions! We had a framework, what Bill always called a *Weltanschauung*!

David Green
Visiting Professor of History, Cornell University
Cornell BA 1962, Cornell PhD 1967

Walt Takes the Long View

In June 1962, having successfully defended my honors thesis, which I wrote under Walt's superb guidance, I went up to his West Sibley office to say goodbye. At his suggestion, and following in his footsteps, I was leaving to begin graduate work at Stanford with Thomas A. Bailey. As always, Walt sat behind his desk while I sat across from him. We chatted, and suddenly I said, "I don't know any history." Walt smiled and said, "That's okay. Wait until you get to graduate school; you'll have lots of time,"

Though not initially intending to, I again followed in his footsteps by leaving Stanford (and Bailey) after my M.A. After taking a year off from graduate work, I happily accepted Walt's invitation to return to Cornell to become his first Ph.D. student.

Fast forward to June 1967. Having successfully defended my dissertation, I again went up to West Sibley to say goodbye. Largely on the strength of his letter of reference, I was leaving to take up my first teaching position at Ohio State. He sat behind the desk while I sat across from him. We chatted, and suddenly I said, "I don't know any history." Walt smiled and said, "That's okay. Wait until you start teaching; you'll have lots of time."

Fast forward again to August 1969. At Walt's initiative, I had been invited to teach Summer Session at Cornell prior to taking up my new position at the University of Saskatchewan. Since he was not teaching in the summer, he graciously invited me to use his West Sibley office while he used his Olin Library carrel. I had just finished entering final grades and was packing my books when suddenly there he was. I got up to offer him his chair, but he waved me to sit down while he sat across from me. So now I was sitting where he usually sat, while he was sitting where I usually sat. We chatted, and suddenly I said, "I don't know any history." Walt just smiled and said, "That's okay. Wait until you retire; you'll have all the time in the world."

More than half a century later, as I once again prepare (at age 81) to teach Summer Session at our beloved Cornell, I think to myself, "I don't know any history." And I can hear Walt laughing and saying, "What do you expect? You haven't retired yet."

Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu
Professor of History, Rice University
Cornell PhD 1991

Rock Star

I "met" Walt through reading *America, Russia, and the Cold War* as a college student in Tokyo in 1981 or 1982. His book was assigned in my "American Foreign Policy History" seminar and I immediately became enthralled by his scholarship. As I began my graduate studies, I slowly began to fantasize about perhaps someday meeting him and telling him in person how much I admired his work. My thesis adviser in Japan, the late Dr. Tadashi Aruga, had worked with Walt through international collaborative publishing projects and conferences. He would tell us about how nice and unassuming Walt was to everybody. By 1985, I could not suppress the urge to "go to America" and work with this legendary figure. Yes, I was adoring Walt almost like the way I was adoring my then-favorite American rock star, Billy Joel.

I was fortunate enough to receive a Fulbright scholarship to study in the US and was quickly admitted to all graduate programs I applied to *except* Cornell. Come April 1986, still no word from Cornell but I had to tell the Japanese Fulbright Commission which school I had chosen to

attend. I was so desperate that I placed an international call (it was still very expensive) from my home in Tokyo at 2:00 am. My $20-per-minute call was first directed to the History Department office. After speaking with Jackie Hubble (the department secretary) and then Dr. James John (the Director of Graduate Studies at the time) I was informed that there had been some bureaucratic mix-up, that I had been accepted into the program and that a formal acceptance letter would be sent shortly. As I breathed a big sigh of relief, Jim John mentioned that he had just seen Walt pass by in the hallway and he would go get him and put him on the phone. The next 30 seconds were the most heart-throbbing moment of my life up to that moment. Walt said hello and kind words of welcome to Cornell to this Japanese graduate student. I may never be able to speak with Billy Joel (which has turned out to be true) but I was now speaking with THAT Walter LaFeber!

Thirty-seven years, a PhD and three academic jobs spanning Japan and the US later, Walt remains the brightly shining star in my universe. He was so patient with this international student whose previous academic training in a different culture had never prepared her to engage in critical thinking and formulating her own questions. He was so generous with his time going through this former student's book manuscripts and offered detailed and insightful feedback. Come to think of it, now I am older than Walt was when I arrived at Cornell. Never a day goes by without me asking myself if I am treating my students and colleagues the same way Walt always did his. I try to do my best, but he is truly a tough act to follow. Thank you, Professor LaFeber (that's how I persisted in calling him until 2001 or 2002), for everything you've taught me through your own life and work.

Robert Hannigan
Suffolk University (retired)
Cornell BA 1971

Hey LaFeber!

It was 1971. I had just graduated and was staying in Ithaca for the summer before heading off to grad school that fall. Before entering Olin Library one afternoon, I heard a female student hollering irately: "LaFeber! Hey LaFeber!" I was rather appalled by this rudeness, but then a second later understood when I saw a small furry dog running hurriedly in her direction.

As this recollection suggests, Walter LaFeber had a big impact on Cornell in my day, as I know he did for many years thereafter. Hundreds of students were taking his survey course on U.S. foreign relations, desperately hoping it might help them make sense of what the U.S. was doing in Vietnam. Never had the study of history, taught by such masters as Walt, George McT. Kahin (of the government department), and Dominick LaCapra, among many others, seemed more important.

Speaking for myself, the results were life-changing. A pretty conservative young man, hailing from suburban Long Island, I entered college intending to prepare for law school and then, eventually, to go into politics. (In one of my college interviews, I recall describing myself as a "Nixon Republican.")

Those goals came under serious review pretty quickly. The teaching assistant I had in the American survey course, Howard Kushner, one of Walt's grad students, made me wonder if really knew so much about the world as I'd thought. On his advice, I signed up for Walt's U.S. foreign relations survey for my sophomore year, and from then on took as many courses with him, and others in the history department, as I possibly could. I'd always loved the subject, but now I was also beginning to understand the discipline's immeasurable value as a "way of learning." There followed a career of teaching, research, and writing in the field that has lasted for more than fifty years.

In every way, Walt was key to this. He provided a model of what a true teacher/scholar should be. Respectful and generous toward all, he presented his ideas clearly and courageously, welcomed reasoned debate, asked challenging questions, and insisted on intellectual rigor and integrity. Above all, as I learned over many years, he cared greatly about his students.

Richard Immerman
Professor of History Emeritus, Temple University
Cornell BA 1971

Rain Delay

I arrived at Cornell in 1967. The Vietnam War had already reached a level of intensity that generated a growing protest movement on campus, and by the end of my first semester that movement became the focal point of virtually all my activities. I took Walt's course because his lectures were already legendary and because of its connection to my focal point. But I spent more time trying to end the war than on my studies.

Walt nevertheless wrote a letter recommending me for graduate school. And unlike my Ph.D. advisors, he urged me not to be discouraged by the challenge of writing a dissertation on the 1954 intervention in Guatemala. Then, after completing my degree, I organized a session on the CIA operations in Guatemala and Cuba for the 1980 OAH meeting in California. Walt agreed to chair it. The session turned into chaos; many in the audience used the forum to denounce US imperialism in every corner of the globe. Walt told me afterward that he was done with academic meetings. I feared that he was also done with me.

It took baseball for our relationship to recover—and to blossom. Again, the stage was a meeting of the OAH, this time in Cincinnati three years later. What prompted Walt to attend remains for me a mystery. I was there to receive an award for my revised dissertation. Of more significance,

the Reds were at home playing the Cubs. Both teams were mediocre, and the weather was raw and damp. But it was the Cubs, and hence for Walt, attending was a must. He put together a small group that included Tom Paterson, Lloyd Gardner, myself, and a few others.

The temperature dropped, the rain intensified, and the Cubs fell farther and farther behind. Lloyd especially complained about how miserable he was and kept asking out loud to whomever was listening why we were there. Yet Walt remained riveted to the game, and he recognized that I was a kindred spirit. While Lloyd grumbled, we dissected and analyzed. Once again, I was Walt's student, and this time I was all in.

I recalled that game when, as a chaired professor decades later, I received an invitation to serve on the board of *Political Science Quarterly*. The invitation made explicit that I would replace Walter LaFeber. We really did share a history, I thought to myself as I accepted.

David A. Langbart
Archivist, National Archives and Records Administration*
Cornell BA 1979

Call Me Walt

My first encounter with Walter LaFeber was on August 29, 1975, during Freshman Registration. It was about 8:15 in the morning in Uris Library and I was signing up for a class that required his signature on the registration form. In looking back, I can truly say that was a life altering moment. Much of the direction of my academic and professional careers stemmed from the relationship I had with him, and it all began in that brief meeting and in that class.

When I began corresponding with LaFeber after I graduated from Cornell in 1979, I addressed my letters to "Mr. LaFeber" and sometimes "Professor LaFeber." He signed his "Walter LaFeber." Over time, his signature morphed into "Walt LaFeber" and then to just plain "Walt." I continued with "Mr. LaFeber" and "Professor LaFeber" until he finally ordered me to change my ways, writing "Note: Not 'Mr. LaFeber' - Hell, David, you're nearly middle aged (like me!)." I wasn't yet, but I certainly felt like I had hit the big time.

Walt was not all about history. After one memorable dinner in Washington, during which we discussed a wide variety of topics, including music - another of his loves - and I extolled the attributes of a new modern classical recording (Henryk Gorecki's Symphony No. 3 with Dawn Upshaw), we walked past a local record store. He motioned that we should go in and for the next little while we shared our thoughts on a variety of musical styles. Walt purchased the recording I had recommended and later indicated that he liked it.

*While the author's professional affiliation is the National Archives and Records Administration, his contribution to this volume is a personal statement written on his own time and reflecting his personal views and opinions.

Douglas Little
Professor of History Emeritus, Clark University
Cornell PhD 1978

A Shaggy Dog Story

I first met Walt LaFeber in August 1972 upon my arrival in Ithaca to start graduate school after completing my BA at the University of Wisconsin, where I had studied with Tom McCormick. It was awe at first sight. Walt was a fabulous lecturer and an extraordinary scholar, of course, but it was his mentorship that made him truly unique. He slogged through my 500-page dissertation on the Spanish Civil War without complaint, he ran interference with Cornell University Press so that it could become a book, and he provided constant encouragement and cogent advice for my later work on US policy in the Middle East. I landed my job at Clark University thanks largely to Walt's friendship with George Billias, who chaired the search committee.

There was not a kinder or wiser historian on the face of the planet, but I think I miss Walt's sense of humor most. My absolute favorite memory was back in the late 1970s when I was a TA in his survey of US foreign relations. Walt was teaching in Ives 120, a dual-level lecture hall that seated about 300 people on the ILR quad. There were two doors up front, one that exited outside onto Tower Road and the other that faced this weird interior courtyard.

It was a sunny morning in late April. Both doors were wide open, and in wandered two dogs. Not a problem. Walt liked dogs. And then the dogs started to become amorous. We TAs were always supposed to ride shotgun, so I got up, shooed the dogs outside, and closed the door. Walt quipped "That's the open-door policy in action" and brought down the house. I took my seat, Walt resumed his lecture, and then we heard the sound of barking dogs getting closer and closer. The next thing we knew, the same two dogs burst back into Ives 120 from the courtyard. Walt deadpanned: "And that's just about how well the open-door policy usually works." Even more uproarious laughter erupted.

Lorena Oropeza
Professor of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley
Cornell Ph.D., 1996

A Multifaceted Man

I first met Walt LaFeber through his scholarship. In the fall of 1987, I was an *Orlando Sentinel* journalist contemplating pursuing a graduate degree in history at Cornell University. I had only to read a few pages of *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* before I knew that I had found the person with whom I wished to work. The persuasive prose, the damning evidence, the sheer timeliness of the book, captivated me.

The following spring, I met Professor LaFeber in person. All business, he immediately asked me what my dissertation was about. Although I had been accepted into the program by then, as a journalism major, I was minimally prepared for graduate school. I barely understood what a dissertation was! Sensing that I had some catching up to do, Walt suggested that I move to Ithaca early. I spent the summer of 1988 taking two history courses (one taught by a visiting Doug Little) and plowing through a massive reading list that Walt provided.

I am just realizing now that I never paid for those courses. Walt arranged that. So along with maintaining impeccably high standards and high expectations, Walt acted on behalf of others. They were interconnected facets of the same man. Over the next two years, "W.L.," as he signed all his notes ("Walt" emerged only after graduation) kept asking me about my dissertation topic until I had a viable answer. His constant encouragement toward the finish line was embedded in the asking.

If Walt nonetheless appeared intimidating on occasion, he also paid careful attention to power relations between himself and his students, as one of my favorite memories of him attests. One day, I had dropped by his cubbyhole of an office in Olin Library before heading to the history department in McGraw Hall. He had a letter that he wished to mail from the department. Yet he appeared to squirm at the prospect of asking me to drop off the letter for him. I was a woman. I was a graduate student. This was an administrative task. His Midwestern politeness no doubt added to his hesitation. I had to tell him to just give me the letter.

Powerful yet powerfully aware, demanding yet generous, Walt could be tender as well as tough. One final recollection: the genuine happiness that he expressed when I told him that I was getting married. John Byrd, then a doctoral student in physics, was the reason I had started looking at graduate studies at Cornell in the first place. Instead of taking me less seriously (my worry all along), Walt was glad that I had found a life partner. Clearly speaking from experience, and a love of Sandra, he considered marriage a definitive advantage in life.

Of course, he told me, before I drifted to thoughts of a December wedding, I had better turn in my final paper for him!

Andrew Rotter
Professor of History Emeritus, Colgate University
Cornell BA 1975

The Best Advice I Never Expected

I became a historian because of Walt LaFeber, and I nearly didn't because of him.

I never imagined myself doing what LaFeber did. No one else—certainly not I—could be that intellectually powerful, that polished a stage performer, that brilliant a scholar, that committed

politically (while nevertheless remaining subtle and unpredictable in his politics), that kind and generous and decent despite his justified fame. Since I couldn't come close to him in any of these things, I saw no point in entering his field.

I did like the idea of teaching. In the fall of my junior year at Cornell, I took an education course, and in the spring I became a student teacher in a Western Civilization class at Ithaca High School. (One of my students was Walt's son, Scott, who perhaps unsurprisingly did very well.) It was a lot of work, but I enjoyed it, and when my apprenticeship ended, I went to see Walt and tell him that I thought I might like to teach secondary school history. He heard me out, then said—I'll never forget it—"An honorable profession. But you don't want to do that. Go get a PhD in history and teach at a university. Here's where you should apply." He listed off six places, really good ones. I wrote them down, nodding mutely, and walked out of his office feeling stunned and elated that he actually thought I could get into any of them and go on to do what he did.

It would later seem to me that Walt's advice, given to me during one of the profession's periodic job crises, was akin to one of Steve Martin's best bits. "*You* [Martin declared] can be a millionaire! Here's how. First: [rapid fire] get a million dollars. Then… !" It turned out that Walt's seemingly matter-of-fact advice was no guarantee of my success. Graduate school wasn't easy. But it was Walt's confidence in me that kept me at it, made me determined to fulfill whatever promise he had seen in me. I didn't have to be him. No one could be. But I could be me, and still find something to say, to my students and my fellow historians.

James F. Siekmeier
Professor of History, West Virginia University
Cornell PhD 1993

Letter of Recommendation

Although others have said it; it's in this volume in multiple places; but, it bears repeating. Walt LaFeber was one of the most intelligent, and decent, people I've ever met. He also gave his time selflessly to his students. One example of his giving of his time was that when I applied for jobs, he would write a second letter of recommendation (LOR), in addition to the letter that was sent with my job application. During one job interview, I remember the chair of the History Department told me specifically he was impressed that LaFeber sent a second LOR (and I got the job).

And the content of LORs? Of course, they are anonymous. However, I did manage to see a LOR that he wrote for me. LaFeber's gifts were on display in that letter of recommendation I ended up seeing. My last year of graduate school, I applied for a fellowship. The application required that he submit a sealed LOR to me to. In turn, I was to submit it with my application to the granting agency. For some reason which I cannot remember, I ended up not applying for the fellowship.

So, I opened the LOR. There I was, summed up perfectly, in that clear, crisp LaFeber-ian prose. I was flattered that he gave me such a positive evaluation. But, of course, in typical LaFeber fashion, he did not go overboard in his praise – and tactfully omitted criticisms he could have made. That LOR was the gift that kept on giving – because I used it as a model for the many LORs I've written for students over the years.

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Standoff at the Statler

I enjoyed the tremendous good fortune of not just one, but two great undergraduate mentors. Richard Polenberg hired me as a research assistant when he was finishing *Fighting Faiths* in the summer of 1986, and he supervised my research on an NEH-funded summer project a year later. Dick (I of course addressed him as Professor Polenberg at the time) wisely insisted I gain wider exposure, so he sent me to Walt LaFeber. I then happily spent my senior year writing my honors thesis under Walt's direction and reading page proofs of *The American Age* with him as one of his undergraduate RAs.

My favorite Walt story comes much later, during an archival trip to Cornell in October 2003, when Walt took me out to lunch at the Statler Hotel. We chatted happily and easily about all manner of topics, when our salads arrived. I dredged up a dim memory from my Chinese immigrant upbringing and remembered to wait for an honored elder to start before digging in myself. Walt did not touch his plate, however. I knew he had had heart surgery recently and worried that he seemingly had no appetite. I nattered merrily away to cover up my growing sense of alarm, when finally, unable to stand it any longer, I picked up my fork and took the tiniest nibble.

Walt immediately tucked in, and I remembered: Walt was a gentleman. He had manners, he was raised right, and a gentleman never breaks bread before a lady. Walt was old school in the best sense of the term, with an insistence on civility and respect as fundamental to personal and professional relationships. I like to think that had I only possessed a more rigid devotion to filial duty, Walt and I would still be seated and facing off at the Statler to the present day.