

# Thinking Otherwise

History has to be ~~re~~written by each generation. Even if the facts are the ~~same~~slant on the facts will be different

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his seminars on Cold War diplomacy, and, occasionally, to his rendition of the US survey pitched to first-year students. The secret to his success in the classroom was not very complicated. Walt kept his lectures focused on the forest rather than the trees, he wavered in challenging and setting high expectations for his students, and he radiated a kindness and a humility that made him extraordinarily approachable.

Undergraduates and PhD students were not the only Cornellians enthralled by Walt LaFeber. As early as the mid-1960s, faculty colleagues across campus admired his leadership and respected his commitment to principle. From the 1970s through 1996 and beyond, deans, provosts, and presidents sought his counsel, and trustees were astonished by his commitment to the university. Yet although Walt was hopelessly devoted to Cornell, he remained, first and foremost, a historian who had no interest whatsoever in becoming an administrator, as he once made very clear with his trademark sense of humor. Dale Corson became President in 1969, I told someone I thought so highly of Dale that I'd help collect the garbage at Cornell if he asked. Walt recalled long afterward, "Several years later, Dale asked me to be Dean of the Arts College. I immediately said no. Then came the punchline: He said he had heard I'd collect garbage for him. I said that yes I would, but I would not be Dean."<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter Two, "The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist," Lloyd Gardner and Thomas McCormick reveal how Walt LaFeber came to be that historian. After earning his MA at Stanford, he entered the PhD program at the University of Wisconsin, then, as a student of progressivism in a state where the ghost of Robert ("Fighting Bob") LaFollette shadowed with the country's leading right-wing demagogue, Joseph P. "Tail Gunner Joe" McCarthy. Madison, the state capital, was riven by a town and gown divide, and many locals convinced



“It is difficult to hold a chair at Cornell and be a radical—at least some times. On the other hand, I’m not about to go into a monastery to prove a point.”

As David Langbart makes clear in

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The final six chapters of this volume highlight our second goal, to address  
LaFeber's wide-

colonies in the Caribbean and the Far East during the late 1890s signaled a transition from continental to transoceanic expansion and a compelling new interpretive framework that earned him the American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Prize in 1963.

In his lectures and in his writings on the antebellum period, LaFeber traced this expansionist impulse back several generations to James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," who argued in the 1780s that the most effective solution to the political challenges facing the new republic was to "extend the sphere." Then LaFeber turned the spotlight on his hero, John Quincy Adams, who as secretary of state in 1823 persuaded the president to promulgate the Monroe Doctrine, a geopolitical blueprint for a rising American empire that would take on increasingly theological overtones from the 1890s to the 1940s and beyond. "I have not been able to discover how doctrine became a term in US foreign policy, but it is clear that it has an overweight religious component that makes it central to understanding US foreign policy—and why Americans support it," LaFeber confessed four decades after the publication of *The New Empire*. "It began when doctrine first appeared during the 18<sup>th</sup> Great Awakening and took off from there—until now, every President has to be certified American by having a doctrine."<sup>7</sup>

Having reframed the traditional narrative of the US collision with Spain during the 1890s, LaFeber turned his attention to the US collision with the Soviet Union on Harry Truman's watch. Chapter Five, "Reconstructing the Back Story," by Frank Costigliola and Jeffrey Englehot only reveals how LaFeber came to write *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, his most widely read book, but also uncovers the evolution of the great historian's thinking in response to the shifting relationship and intensifying rivalry between the superpowers. Juggling the relativism of Carl Becker, the realism of George Kennan, and the revisionist mentors at Wisconsin, LaFeber



sought to solve a riddle posed by Reinhold Niebuhr: Was the Cold War a Greek tragedy of inevitability or a Christian tragedy of possibility? Through ten editions, he would spend forty years refining his answer, adding new research, while preserving a crisp, concise analysis of the evolving Soviet-American rivalry that would be read by thousands and thousands of students. Dismissing those who framed the Cold War as "long peace" that never saw America and Russia fire shots in anger at each other, he emphasized the terrible human costs that the superpowers inflicted on ordinary men and women after the Cold War spilled into Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

A year after the sixth edition of *America, Russia, and the Cold War* appeared in 1988, LaFeber

21<sup>st</sup> century, LaFeber argued that a new cold war with Russia was inevitable not only because of Vladimir Putin's determination to reverse what he saw as the Russian autocrat as the greatest tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the demise of the Soviet Union—but also because of US arrogance and ignorance in expanding the NATO military alliance into former Soviet domains

Readers of Chapter Six, "Thinking about Democracy," will not be surprised to learn from Lorena Oropeza and James Siekmeier that inevitability was also the central theme of LaFeber's most controversial book. *Inevitable Revolutions* was published in 1983, just as Washington was escalating its neo-secret covert war against left-wing insurgents in Central America, whom the Reagan administration claimed were urban inspired and Soviet controlled. Vigorously rejecting that claim, LaFeber argued that the turmoil in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and their neighbors was merely the latest episode in America's centuries-old quest for hegemony over its Latin neighbors. Driven by security concerns in the Caribbean, economic interests from Guatemala to Chile, and reflexive anticommunism, US policies and actions had produced not democracy but "neo-dependency," a brutal and exploitative system that would cost thousands of lives in Central America during the 1980s

In many ways, *Inevitable Revolutions* was a bookend to the story LaFeber had begun to tell in *The New Empire*. Race figured much more prominently in his analysis of the 1980s than in his account of the 1890s, something that reflected a field in transition, with diplomatic historians focusing less on the white men who controlled US foreign policy and more on the people of color who were on the receiving end of American hegemony. Because *Inevitable Revolutions* sold well and was widely adopted for classroom use, LaFeber became a lightning rod for supporters of Reagan's anticommunist crusade in Central America, transforming him briefly into an embattled public intellectual, a role in which he was never comfortable.

abiding faith in democracy, however, never wavered, notwithstanding critics erroneously branding him a Marxist.

Even as he was chronicling the carnage in Central America, LaFolse "Turning to Asia," where, as Anne Foster and Andrew Roth highlight in Chapter Seven, he prophesied that deepening rivalries across the Pacific



Our last chapter, *Confronting the Tocqueville Problem*, addresses Walter LaFeber's career-long preoccupation with the durability of the American experiment. Eric Alterman and Richard Immerman present his final book, *The Deadly Bet*, as a timeless but underappreciated political allegory featuring heroes and villains during the annus horribilis of 1968. *The Deadly Bet* was published in 2005 at the very moment that the United States was sinking ever deeper into quicksand on the Euphrates as a result of a disastrous policy that evoked memories of an earlier quagmire on the Mekong. This succinct book is LaFeber's most explicit commentary on racism, political opportunism, and other domestic pathologies. The teacher and citizen scholar shared Alexis de Tocqueville's conviction that democracy was not compatible with empire, and he feared that the fallout from the 9/11 attacks might be worse than the legacy of the Vietnam War.

Donald Trump's four years in the White House heightened LaFeber's fears, and his preferred outcome in the 2020 election was never in doubt. "Biden can go to sleep after his inauguration and remain comatose until 2025," LaFeber quipped two months before voters went to the polls, and "he'll still be more constructive than Trump has been or ever will be." He lived long enough to watch right-wing insurrectionists storm the US Capitol, a chilling reminder that Americans should not take anything for granted.

Union? Have Reagan's misguided policies in Central America created an insolvable problem along the southern border, where thousands of refugees continue to flee political violence from the 1980s? Can the United States pivot to Asia without triggering another clash, this time not with Japan but with China? Can US policymakers find ways to harness neoliberal globalization fueled by technological innovation and prevent the free market mantra from triggering trade wars, financial instability, and an American backlash? Will 2024 bring another annus horribilis far worse than the one in 1968? Is an empire for liberty an oxymoron?

Walter LaFeber has left it to us to provide the answers, and the fate of American democracy hangs in the balance. By paying homage to him and his scholarship, this volume explores these questions even if it does not claim to answer them. Despite always thinking otherwise, LaFeber himself could not do that. But reading his books and revisiting his lectures requires us to ask

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Becker to William Dodd, January 27, 1932, in Michael Kammen, *What Is the Good of History?* Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1995 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> LaFeber as quoted in Jenny Proctor, "One Role of a Professor 'Think Otherwise,' Says LaFeber," *Cornell Chronicle* (October 18, 2010), <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2010/10/renowned-professor-talks-being-professor>

<sup>3</sup> LaFeber email to Douglas Little, May, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Eisenhower, "Address to the American People," January 17, 1961, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhower-farewell-address>

<sup>6</sup> LaFeber to David Langbart, January, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> LaFeber email to Douglas Little, June, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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<sup>9</sup> LaFeber to Douglas Little, September 24, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> LaFeber email to Susan Brewer, August 2020.