Walter LaFeber:
The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist

"Fred Harrington." Walt's own abiding sense of irony in his writings, teaching, and persona are quite reminiscent of Fred.)

In the first week, Fred read off a huge list of books we were to read for the next week's discussion. Graduate school was quite a shock, until one realized that "reading," in the sense we were used to, meant something else at this level. It meant "extracting" the thesis of any book assigned, not starting at the first page and going straight through to the end. The books included a whole variety of approaches and subjects, but Harrington never told us beforehand, or after the discussion, what books were good or bad, which ones were especially useful. For all that, we were on our own. Among that first batch was Kennan's *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*, Hans Morgenthau's *In Defense of the National Interest*, Robert Osgood's *Ideals and Self-Interests in American Foreign Relations*, Frank Tannenbaum's *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy*, and Charles Beard's *The Idea of National Interest*.[2] If a question came up during discussions, Harrington, a consummate bibliophile, always had another book to suggest. We covered various special subjects, such as ethnicity, interest groups, and the differences between political science and history. Harrington himself seemed indifferent throughout to the underlying theories of our readings. His methodology was inductive rather than theory-driven. (Yet, when the time came, he would call back to Wisconsin William Appleman Williams, still the most stimulating and provocative theory-man who has ever written on U.S. foreign policy.) The seminar students, however, were excited about the theories and, especially, the realist perspective of Morgenthau and Kennan. Only Carl Parrini, the sole seminar member with economics as an outside field, mentioned Beard. Our collective failure to engage Beard's arguments led Harrington to suggest, at seminar's end, that we reread Beard's *The Idea of National Interest* and make him the focus for our next meeting. Harringeto

MA or senior theses: Walt's on Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, Lloyd's on FDR and colonialism, and Tom's on Arthur S. Vandenberg and bipartisanship—all written from a conventional realist and internationalist perspective. Since Walt and Tom already had their MAs, Lloyd's new work for his master's degree received more detailed attention. Lloyd's first seminar presentation, on Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies toward European colonialism in World War II, was realist to the core. He recalls, however, that as he worked on FDR, Harrington made a point of asking, "What about economics?" At first, Lloyd simply didn't get it, and added some pages on Lend-Lease, without really grasping what Harrington was trying to

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sor Curtin had developed a field called the British Empire. (Later, he would transform it into the Atlantic World and then to the even larger Third World.) Walt chose imperial Britain as his outside modern field. Curtin's study of the British Empire sharpened Walt's conceptualization of empire and encouraged him to think comparatively. So his scholarship on the American empire has always been implicitly informed by his understanding of an earlier British empire, both formal and informal. (Apparently, Walt could also project those concepts further back in time: he and Don Kagan once taught a comparative course on the Roman and American empires at Cornell in the summer of 1968.)

Also influential were other grad students. Almost too numerous to mention, any list certainly would include our seminar mate, Carl Parrini, who brought his broad command of international economics to a dissertation that would eventually become his brilliant *Heir to Empire*, a study of U.S. economic diplomacy during World War I and after; Marty Sklar, already embarked on his pioneering studies

Williams would later tell a legislative investigating committee on the prowl for subversives. Asked what he taught, he said, "I teach people how to think." Not *what* to think, mind you, but *how* to think. So it seemed to us that our job was not to propagandize and make fledgling revisionists out of our students. Our job was to teach them to think *critically*—and the place to start was how to discover and question underlying assumptions. And what better place than to let them start on us—in the hope that they would eventually question the assumptions of all their teachers, all their books, all their governmental authority figures, and eventually—most importantly—all their own assumptions. We wanted students to get outside the mental boxes that they had inhabited before they entered the university.

In the decades since graduate school, we have both stayed close to Walt—in three different ways. First, we stayed connected because we were imaginative and energetic in finding ways to see each other in varying combinations of twos and threes (or, when we were lucky and our

The three Wisconsin graduates (Lloyd Gardner, Walt LaFeber, Tom McCormick) meet at a conference.

working on about the same time his autographed copy of the finished product arrives at the doorstep.)

While we lack the disinterested distance to assess Walt's work over the last forty years, we do feel secure in saying a few things about both the contemporary character and the literate quality of that work. When Walt's dissertation on Grover Cleveland's Latin American policy was revised and immensely expanded to become *The New Empire*, and to win the Beveridge Prize in 1963, it was apparent that all of his books would have "contemporary" themes.[11] The forces he identifies as shaping the outlook of American policymakers in the late nineteenth century can easily be seen at work today as a later generation of leaders pursues its objectives. The average life of a scholarly book is probably twenty years or less. *The New Empire* is as popular today as when it was first published, precisely because it does speak to issues not fixed in one place, at one time. Whether these issues include the exceptionalism of American ideology, or the more easily identified economic interests behind specific policies, LaFeber takes us to the heart of the matter.

Consider some of the works that followed *New Empire*. *The Panama Canal* (1978) put the 1974–77 treaty negotiations in historical perspective, educating

11. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY, 1963).