

Chapter Four

EXTENDING THE SPHERE: THE NEW EMPIRE

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Legions of Cornell University undergraduates remember Professor Walter LaFeber's two-semester survey of the history of US foreign relations as a treasured part of their college education.¹ As a lecturer, LaFeber was not only eloquent and clear. His style also invited

consider how dilemmas over power and freedom were triggered by territorial, commercial, and overseas expansion. The question of the viability of republican institutions in the United States as it pursued its global ambitions would be fundamental to his interpretation of American history. In this chapter, we begin by addressing LaFeber's prize-winning first book, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1898*.³ We then consider additional writings of his on Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, and US policymakers between

One, apparently, was Professor Robert E. Bowers, LaFeber's undergraduate mentor at Hanover College. By his own account, LaFeber decided to become a historian largely because of Bowers' thought-provoking courses on US foreign relations.⁵ It was Bowers who advised LaFeber to pursue a master's degree at Stanford, where, under historian Thomas A. Bailey, he would learn to write in an accessible style. (LaFeber more than accomplished that.) But he ought then to move on to the University of Wisconsin for his doctorate. Madison, Bowers offered, was where the most significant reexaminations of the American past appeared to be under way.⁶

Indeed, they were. LaFeber later would recall that his graduate education at the University of Wisconsin was "a revelation." As Lloyd Gardner and Thomas McCormick explain in their chapter in this volume, this was due largely to the teaching of Fred Harvey Harrington (who directed LaFeber's dissertation) and William Appleman Williams (Harrington's former student for whom LaFeber was a teaching assistant). At Madison, a new generation of scholars was inspired by the progressive tradition of American historical inquiry, which called for the investigation of problems of economic and political inequality.

Years later, LaFeber remembered both the demanding standards Harrington set and how much his graduate students admired and respected the kind of scholar and teacher he had been. For them, Harrington embodied what an intellectual's role was all about. They particularly appreciated his "willingness to . . . think the unconventional, to question the accepted, and . . . to deal with the roots, transformations, and effects of power" in a nation that had become "the most powerful in history."⁷ It was a model that would guide LaFeber for the rest of his career.

Harrington also shaped LaFeber's conviction that it was vitally important for Americans to

the most outstanding new work in American history. Not yet thirty, LaFeber had established himself as one of the most important historians of his generation.

Quite remarkably for a book that is now sixty years old, *The New Empire* remains today the place to start for anyone interested in studying the emergence of the United States as a world power. This is not because other influential investigations of the late 19th century have not been done. In fact, LaFeber, in the preface he wrote for the 35th anniversary edition of *The New Empire*, acknowledged, and celebrated, the “extraordinary amount of work” that had appeared on the book’s subjects and themes since its publication.⁹ Rather, it is because the f (er)-1 (,)1.1 j3 0 Tkt1 (t)-2 ts bi

his hands . . . as if he wanted to exclaim, ‘Say it isn’t so!’ From that moment,” he continues, “I feared long unfavorable reviews and a short life for the book.”¹¹

One quite irate attack was mounted, this, in 1978, by the naval historian James A. Field, Jr. In an article entitled “American Imperialism: The Worst Chapter in Almost Any Book,” published in the *American Historical Review*, Field disparaged the idea that the United States was pursuing any new, expansionist policy at all on the world stage in the 19th century, arguing instead that historians like LaFeber, saw patterns and rationality where there was none. In Field’s view, America may very well have been as “much or more the used” as the user in its international transactions.”¹²

LaFeber did not believe that chapters on the 1890s were the worst in American diplomatic historiography. In response to this critique, he noted that Field echoed the analysis of Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis published forty years earlier. According to Bemis, LaFeber explained, “the grand story of American expansion rolls along until the narrative encounters

That the United States had expanded its control over territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific in the late 1890s had of course never been in dispute. Before the publication of *The New Empire*, most scholars had explicitly rejected the relevance of economic factors. The most commonly adduced explanations for the war with Spain, and the colonial expansion that followed, revolved around the impact of America's sensationalizing "yellow press," the purported inability of President William McKinley to resist an outpouring of public outrage over Spain's brutal treatment of the people of Cuba, the fortuitous presence in key government positions of a cabal of "large policy" enthusiasts (led by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts), the popularity of Social Darwinian ideas, and an alleged nation-wide "psychic crisis," a mood of unease and frustration set off by the depression of that decade.¹⁴

The popular "yellow press" interpretation is succinctly captured in one sentence of Henry F. Pringle's Pulitzer Prize winning *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography*. "In all probability," Pringle argued, the war with Spain "never would have come had not Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst been anxious to increase the circulation of their newspapers." As LaFeber notes in the 1998 preface, the *New York Times* continued to place a heavy emphasis on this argument in its commemoration of the war's centennial. It lives on in the classic film *Citizen Kane* where the character Charles Foster Kane, a thinly veiled stand-in for Hearst, telegraphs his correspondent in Cuba, "You provide the prose poems, I'll provide the war."¹⁵

The notion that the 1890s were unrelated either to any prior developments in the nation's past or to America's foreign policy in the 20th century had appeared in the most recent treatment

of the era. In *Imperial Democracy*, Harvard historian Ernest R. May concluded that the United States “had not sought a new role in world affairs” in the 1890s, but instead “had greatness thrust upon it.”¹⁶ By the 1990s, historian Edward P. Crapol was noticing what remains the case today: scholars had come to agree that “the three decades prior to the Spanish-American War” of 1898 were “a crucial transitional phase leading to America’s emergence as a major world power.”

The approach LaFeber took in *The New Empire* would be echoed in most of his subsequent work. He did not believe that the United States should acquire territory for its own sake. He believed that the United States should acquire territory only if it was necessary for the nation's defense or if it would benefit the people of the United States.

The first chapter of the book, “Years of Preparation, 1860-1889,” to quote LaFeber, “attempts to show the climactic decade of the 1890s can be properly understood only when placed in the context of the last half of the century.” By the 1850s and 1860s, “the continental empire of which Madison, Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams had dreamed spanned North America.” A “new empire,” meanwhile “had started to take form.” Instead of “searching for farming, mineral, or grazing lands,” Americans would now be looking for “foreign markets for agricultural staples or industrial goods.” Not unlike the earlier continentalism, the chapter offers, this expansionism would also come to exact “a political and often a military price.” The ensuing pages of the chapter trace the country’s industrialization, the dramatic shifts of wealth and power (from southern planters to northern businessmen) that occurred after the Civil War, and Americans’ growing interest in “new frontiers” in the form of foreign markets and raw materials. They looked for those, LaFeber notes, particularly throughout Latin America and in East Asia.

In LaFeber’s view, William Henry Seward, secretary of state under Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, loomed over the entire late-19th century period, because “his vision of empire” foreshadowed subsequent policy. To Seward, a great nation required a transportation network of canals, railroads, and overseas bases; agriculture and manufacturing; exports; cheap labor; and public land at low prices. Even if his initiatives often failed (others, of course, like the acquisition of Alaska, did not), the influential New Yorker set the agenda for the diplomatists who followed him. Interest grew over the ensuing decades in such projects as the construction of a trans-isthmian canal and the acquisition of island bases that might facilitate American activity on the other side of the Pacific.

South America into closer commercial relations with the United States, and, most successfully, boost construction of the sort of battleship fleet endorsed by Mahan.

The “economic formulation” chapter focuses especially on “the formation of a consensus by important political and business leaders on the necessity of a more expansive foreign policy.” This, LaFeber argues, “resulted from the depression which struck the United States from 1893 to 1897.” Most crucially, it reinforced in the minds of those leaders the desirability for the United States of access to markets abroad. Such outlets could even out the business cycle, thereby reducing the domestic social and political unrest that economic downturns had the capacity of generating.

The stage had been set for the United States to “extend the sphere” and pursue a much more active and assertive world role. Chapters five through eight survey the events of the middle to late 1890s and demonstrate their connection to *The New Empire’s* principal thesis. LaFeber describes the Cleveland administration’s confrontational approach to a dispute between Caracas and London over the boundary line between Venezuela and British Guiana. The president and Secretary of State Richard Olney were determined to demonstrate, not just to Britain, but to all the other European powers, the continued attachment of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine. Washington would treat expansion in the western hemisphere by any of them as a threat to its security, its objective being to ensure that the region was under its own “commercial and political control.”

Across the Pacific, concern grew that Imperial Russia might soon challenge access by other powers to markets in China. LaFeber traces how the McKinley administration closely monitored events there even as it became increasingly preoccupied by a revolution in nearby, strategically and economically valuable, Cuba. Indeed, he argues, McKinley's determination finally to eject Spain from the island, and end the disorder there, was in no small part motivated by his desire to be free to address East Asian events.

The upshot of such thinking, of course, was a victory over Spain that provided the United States not only with an enhanced position in the Caribbean, but also with Spain's colonies of Guam and the Philippines. Congress, meanwhile, voted by joint resolution to annex Hawaii. But, LaFeber underscores, these acquisitions were not the ultimate goals. Contrary to what some previous historians believed, the islands were not taken to fulfill a colonial policy. Rather, they were identified as strongpoints and stepping stones relevant to the pursuit of a new, and much broader, albeit less formal, commercial empire in the coming century.

In his essays and books that followed the publication of *The New Empire*, LaFeber explored the deliberate commitment by the United States to expansion. For Americans, as he points out, expansion across the continent and overseas meant the pursuit of wealth, freedom, and opportunity. It also caused big problems, including war, corruption, exploitation, desolation, and the violation of republican ideals. In his analysis of 18th and 19th century US foreign relations, LaFeber examines the many predicaments that accompanied extending the sphere.

LaFeber traces the roots of US expansionism back to the colonial era. He spells this out explicitly in “Foreign Policies of a New Nation: Franklin, Madison, and the ‘Dream of a New Land to Fulfill with People in Self-Control,’ 1750-1804,” an essay that appeared in *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by William Appleman Williams. The title comes from a poem by Robert Frost about James Madison’s “dream of a new land” where people ruled themselves. It was a dream, to be sure, that did not include all the people on land that belonged to someone else. The concept of self-determination had a muddled history, as LaFeber often noted. Although it was a cardinal principle of the American republic, self-determination played an elusive role in US foreign relations. In “Foreign Policies of a New Nation,” LaFeber relates, for example, how the pursuit of a continental empire precipitated delusional invasions of Canada. When their northern neighbors refused to join them, the Americans tried to force them to do so.

The founders believed they could carry out expansion while also preserving republican virtue. The determination to expand came first. At the Albany Congress in 1754, Benjamin Franklin did not address the question whether the colonies should acquire western lands, but rather how to govern them once they were acquired. Franklin suggested the creation of a representative government of the colonies that could establish laws, collect taxes, and raise troops. As LaFeber notes, Franklin envisioned a society free of European corruption as well as people of “swarthy complexion.” In the meantime, the Philadelphian, surrounded by powerful sachems and chiefs at Albany, called first and foremost for the cultivation of native friendship

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Madison's dream of a people in self-control thanks to an extended sphere complemented the founding vision of continental empire. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, believed that independent, property-owning farmers were the backbone of the republic. Accordingly, those farmers and their progeny needed land. As Jefferson's secretary of state, Madison effectively maneuvered the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon Bonaparte. As LaFeber observes, however, Madison himself worried that too vast a country could cause republican institutions to crumble. Madison advised that there should be no representative government in the new territories right away because the few settlers out there were not up to the job of ruling themselves. Half the population was native and Black, while the white people, assumed by Jefferson to be the only people capable of governing the territory, included Creoles, Roman Catholics, and renegades, which he regarded with suspicion. The vaunted principle of self-determination, it seemed, was meant for some people, but not for others.²⁵

In one his most memorable lectures, LaFeber used the escapades of Aaron Burr to illustrate the fragility of the extended sphere following the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. Soon after Jefferson's vice-president fatally shot Alexander Hamilton and fled New Jersey and New York, he conspired with western secessionists and Spanish agents to create a new empire in Mexico. Although Burr's plot failed and he was acquitted of treason, his scheme exposed the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the early republic as it pursued expansion. Jefferson and other national leaders fully intended to extend the nation to the Pacific, but they wanted to do so in a manner that would keep it together.²⁶

LaFeber's hero, John Quincy Adams, believed that union and liberty began at home, and that home was a continental empire. In *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (1965), LaFeber collected speeches, letters, and memoirs that traced the crusade conducted against European colonialism by "the greatest secretary of state in U.S. history."²⁷ He shows how Adams extended the sphere by way of the annexation of Florida, the negotiation of the Canadian boundary, and the Transcontinental Treaty. He notes that Adams was instrumental in articulating the belief expressed in the Monroe Doctrine that "the Americas were for Americans." Promulgated in 1823 by President James Monroe, the doctrine also celebrated the expansion of the United States along with its growing population, resources, and respectability. "By enlarging the basis of our system and increasing the number of States," it declared, "the system itself has been greatly strengthened."²⁸

After succeeding Monroe in the White House, Adams envisioned a "civilized" continent tied together by roads, canals, and railroads. "The spirit of improvement is abroad upon the earth," said the sixth president in his first Annual Message (as the State of the Union address was then called). He urged Congress to equip a research expedition for circumnavigating the globe, establish a university, and erect an astronomical observatory. Adams despaired of his failure to establish a national system of internal improvements. He believed that the exceptional United States had a divine mission to set an example for the rest of the world to follow.²⁹

would respond, when asked, that their research topics were US foreign relations with colonial Southeast Asia, World War II Britain, or Cold War Latin America ... and the 1890s.

LaFeber contributed to the revision of McKinley's reputation as the first modern chief executive. McKinley made his priority the revival of the economy and the restoration of confidence. "The maker must find a taker," the Ohioan said as he promoted the growth of jobs by opening markets at home and abroad.³⁵

In his 1998 preface to the 35th anniversary edition of *The New Empire*, LaFeber revisits his commitment to understanding policymakers as human beings of their time and place. He had found it difficult to label them, he said, eschewing terms of contemporary scholarship such as “idealists” or “isolationists.” He admits that he grew to respect “the intelligence, discipline, and even courage of officials who had to deal with a terrible depression that transformed the nation’s economy, society, politics, and foreign policies—and who used that transformation to make the United States one of the world’s greatest powers in a very brief period of time.”³⁷

He continues, “They nevertheless used that transformation as an excuse to counter most important American principles, notably self-determination, and at times to commit atrocities in Hawaii, Cuba, the Philippines, Central America, and China.” In *The New Empire*, LaFeber briefly and bluntly declares who paid the price for expansion. In its early decades, he writes, “the United States annexed a continental empire by undermining, economically and ideologically, British, French, Spanish, Mexican, and Indian control and taking final possession with money, bullets, or both.”³⁸

LaFeber describes Alfred Thayer Mahan as a man who “drank deeply of the ‘White Man’s Burden’ elixir of his day.” Articles like “The Anglo-Saxon and the World’s Redemption” extolled the spread of US interests into Asia and the Americas. Not everyone was persuaded. LaFeber notes that antiimperialist Mark Twain questioned how the United States could claim to rule benevolently overseas when it had failed to make things better for oppressed minorities at home.³⁹

(and, he notes, the development eventually of a much more powerful presidency). Key transformations also included the emergence of revolutionary new technologies of production and forms of corporate organization in the late 19th century (together, he labels these a Second Industrial Revolution). *The American Search for Opportunity* also says more about those Americans over whom this new political and economic complex ran roughshod as this “springboard” was being put together following the Civil War. “Root hog or die” was the predicament of many small farmers as well as those working in the mills and factories, a large share of whom were new immigrants.

The influence of racism on US foreign policy, LaFeber, argues in *The American Search for Opportunity* was deeply rooted, pervasive, and many-sided. He describes how Senator Albert J. Beveridge advocated the acquisition of the Philippines. The Republican from Indiana raised the historical precedent of the US treatment of the indigenous people of America to justify treating Filipinos in the same way, which meant, as LaFeber points out, “killing or effectively isolating them.” Ironically albeit instructively, the Beveridge Prize that LaFeber was awarded sixty years later for *The New Empire* is named for this expansionist, a longtime member of the American Historical Association and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Chief Justice John Marshall.⁴²

In the 1890s, suffragists sympathized with Filipinos who faced being governed without their consent, while Elihu Root, McKinley’s secretary of war, dismissed the question of voting rights for Filipinos. Root pointed to what he considered the failed Reconstruction-era experiment of granting the right to vote to Black American men. Some antiimperialists condemned such

views, especially as segregation was imposed and lynching increased. Others claimed that the United States already had enough racial trouble without taking on the Filipinos. In the end, LaFeber concludes, imperialists “assumed that if the US government had shown it could keep African Americans and Indians (and women) in their place at home without the vote, it could do the same with Filipinos.”⁴³

The American Search for Opportunity underscores the sheer scale of the ambition welling up in the consciousness of leading Americans by the end of the century. Americans, LaFeber writes, “set out on a quest for opportunities that destroyed order in many of the areas they targeted.” The central thesis of the book relates to the impact of American activity on the economic, social, and political fabric of foreign countries. LaFeber notes how political pressure or economic penetration generally helped to generate disorder or resistance, however much US leaders were ignorant of, or in denial about, the connection. (Indeed, given their ideological blinders, they were more likely to perceive pushback as ingratitude.) As a result, people in the Americas and Asia rebelled against the appropriation of their natural resources, the destruction of their culture, the abuse of their political institutions, and the exploitation of their lives and labor. The assumption of US policymakers that they could keep such people “in their place” was to be repeatedly challenged.⁴⁴

To illustrate the point, LaFeber devotes considerable space to analysis of the late 19th – early 20th century revolutions that took place in Cuba, Mexico, and China. Not infrequently, LaFeber points out, US officials responded to such upheavals with force. In the Dominican Republic, American capital backed sugar planters who shoved peasants off the land. To protect

the friendly government against its own angry, displaced citizens, President Theodore Roosevelt sent warships, invoked what would be known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe

depression. Instead, LaFeber argues, expansion served as an alternative to reform.⁴⁷ That left the problems unsolved, which justified more expansion, more military interventions, and more consolidation of power in the executive. It was back to the “cruel paradox” of John Quincy Adams. Extending the sphere might be fundamental to the existence of the republic, but it also endangered the republic.

In *The New Empire*, LaFeber dismisses the popular notion that the United States was isolationist. That was a myth, he wrote there and elsewhere. From its independence, the United States needed “an active, successful foreign policy.” What American policymakers, from Benjamin Franklin on, really wanted was to avoid entanglements. As it expanded across the continent, the United States preferred to move the British or Mexicans or indigenous people out of the way. Later, policymakers searched for ways to extend US influence abroad through indirect control without commitments and constraints. In this way, the United States joined the competition among the great powers as a new kind of empire.⁴⁸

What if expansion, “deeply rooted in American experience,” were to stop? LaFeber explores what the closing of the continental frontier meant for late 19th-century policymakers in *The New Empire*. Economic transformation led to what John Hay, riffing on the famous Gettysburg Address delivered by his former boss, President Lincoln, referred to as “government of the corporation, by the corporation, and for the corporation.” The consolidation of wealth inspired distrust of authority, labor unrest, and the rise of populism, for which overseas

Endnotes

¹ Evoked vividly in Andrew J. Rotter and Frank Costigliola, "Walter LaFeber: Scholar, Teacher, Intellectual," *Diplomatic History* 28 (November 2004): 28-30.

² LaFeber famously assigned *The Federalist Papers* in his survey course. For the full text of *Federalist, No. 10*, see <https://guides.loc.gov/federalistpapers/text1-10>.

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²⁸ Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home Abroad since 1750* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 81; LaFeber, *John Quincy Adams*, 114.

²⁹ LaFeber, ed. *John Quincy Adams*

⁵⁰ LaFerber quotes poet Walt Whitman at length in *The American Age*, including lines from Whitman's 1860 poem, "The New Empire": "I can't the new empire, grander than any before." LaFerber, *American Age*, 88, 93, 129-130.