The Deadly Bet

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Walter LaFeber's final book, The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam and the 1968 Election, has received far less attention than The New Empire, Inevitable Revolutions, or his other

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The Deadly Bet explicates, illustrates, and analyzes America's Tocqueville problem. Quick to compliment those few public intellectuals who "[took] Tocqueville seriously," most of whom he called "intelligent conservatives" like the Cornell-educated Francis Fukuyama, LaFeber spent his entire career wrestling with, and encouraging all Americans to wrestle with, the incompatibility between America's democratic ideals and the wars its elected leaders choose to fight.[4] It is a small book with a big story, and at first glance, a departure from the pattern of his publications during the previous two decades. Beginning with his history of the Panama Canal treaty, written when the nation was debating its merits during Jimmy Carter's presidency, LaFeber dedicated himself to offering readers deeply researched historical analysis of problems facing the nation at that moment in time.[5] His histories were not "presentist" in the sense that the term is often used; that is, they were not overly influenced and therefore distorted by "present" debates in the United States. Rather, his books provided pundits, policymakers, and the public alike opportunities to situate those debates in their appropriate historical context.

In *The Deadly Bet* this practice is there only by implication.[6] LaFeber sticks to the story that took place nearly four decades earlier. Yet he succeeds in providing helpful historical context not only for 2005, when the book was published and American soldiers were returning in body bags from Iraq, but also for 2023 and beyond. By doing so, as is appropriate for a book aimed at undergraduate students, *The Deadly Bet* reflects and indeed mimics the pedagogical style and techniques that attracted thousands of students—and often their friends, parents, and siblings—to his lectures. LaFeber was a storyteller par excellence. Writing in his characteristic fluid, accessible, and unpretentious style, his narratives, punctuated by deep dives into personalities and laced with anecdotes, irony, and humor, seize the readers' (and audience's)

Then there was Woodrow Wilson. LaFeber does not cite or quote Randolph Bourne in either *The Deadly Bet* or *The American Age*. Yet he was surely familiar with Bourne's writings, particularly his essay "War is the Health of the State," which prior to his succumbing to the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, Bourne intended for inclusion in his unfinished *The State*. The essayist, social critic, and public intellectual lamented that Wilson's decision to enter World War I predictably undermined American democracy. The "moment war is declared, Bourne wrote, the "mass of people" come to resemble a "herd." Through "some spiritual alchemy," they allow themselves "to be regimented, coerced, deranged in all the environments of their lives, and turned into a solid manufactory of destruction toward whatever other people may have, in the appointed scheme of things, come within the range of the Government's disapprobation." The "State" transforms into "a repository of force, determiner of law, arbiter of justice."[17]

Wilson, a scholar of the US constitution and an avowed progressive, recognized the danger. He knew that by committing America's forces and resources to a fight to make the world safe for democracy, he was putting American democracy at risk. "Once lead this people into war," Wilson famously said only hours before requesting a declaration from Congress, "and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life."[18] He too, nevertheless, chose war.

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LaFeber labeled the perception of the separation between the foreign and domestic realms in American politics as "artificial and perilous."[19] Lyndon Johnson agreed. He felt that if he did not prove himself a strong leader in Vietnam and face down the communists there, he could not expect to pass his ambitious domestic agenda on behalf of the poor whites and people of color,

for whom he saw himself as savior. He knew full well before committing himself to war that his decision could jeopardize his grandiose hopes and dreams for his presidency. Fighting a land war

Johnson felt boxed in. He had convinced himself that his most deeply-felt yearnings for the country and for his own role in the history books would come to nothing if he showed weakness in Vietnam. “If I don’t go in now,” he admitted early on in the war, “they won’t be talking about my civil rights bill, or education or beautification. No sir, they’ll push Vietnam right up my ass every time. Vietnam. Vietnam. Vietnam. Right up my ass.”[21]

Johnson predictably bet wrong and eventually found himself forced to forego running for a second full-term as president. LaFeber dissects the drivers of Johnson’s decision to withdraw from the 1968 presidential campaign and seek an exit from Vietnam in a way that not only exposes the Tocqueville problem but also highlights the role of people, ideas, and the domestic underpinnings of US foreign policy. As with the lectures that the co-authors of this chapter recall so vividly, he organizes his narrative around portraits of bigger-than-life individuals, each of whom receives a full chapter. They are, in order, William Westmoreland, Eugene McCarthy, London Johnson, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, and the Vietnamese leader, Nguyen Van Thieu. LaFeber could have chosen different subjects. Alternatives range from anti-war leaders such as Tom Hayden and Abby Hoffman to Black Panthers such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to feminists such as Carol Hanisch and Robin Morgan, who organized an iconic protest in 1968 against the Miss American pageant in Atlantic City. But he “read his room.” LaFeber did not seek to resurrect Great Man history; he exploited biography as a strategy for making the history of US foreign relations appealing and intelligible to undergraduates.

What is more, just as he did in his celebrated New Empire, LaFeber uses individuals to highlight and analyze the themes and dynamics he judges most vital to influencing the course of events that make up the historical moment that he sought to illuminate.[22] Among the most

important of LaFeber's themes is the role those individual personalities play in shaping historical outcomes. He appreciated the constraints and opportunities generated by broad societal and international forces. Notwithstanding the evolution of the historiography on the history of US foreign relations during LaFeber's career, and his support of its many innovations, he remained comfortable featuring individuals in his narratives. The word "bet" in his title signals that individuals make choices, and the choices one individual makes are never the identical choices another person would make in the same position or circumstance. Individuals, therefore, matter. Would John Kennedy have handled Vietnam as his successor did? Almost certainly not![23]

LaFeber positions Johnson's choice of war at the center of his narrative.[24] The choices of the other eight individuals that the book features were to varying degrees reactions to or products of Johnson's seminal one. LaFeber's primary concern, however, as was Tocqueville's, is less with the choices themselves than with the consequences of those choices for American liberty, democracy, and cohesion. In different ways each of the individuals whom LaFeber writes about either reflected or contributed to the consequences of Johnson's choosing war, and those consequences were uniformly detrimental.

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The Tocqueville problem worked in reverse as well: the failure to conduct a foreign policy openly and honestly and thereby retain the democratic support of American citizens

championed the cause of civil rights beyond anything King had imagined possible. Moreover, King, like Johnson, had more than enough to worry about at home. He hoped to bring his movement to the North with his Poor People's Campaign, but it was making little progress. Radical and violence-promoting challengers were growing in power and influence, and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was serving him a daily diet of harassment and torment. By 1966, though, he decided that he could keep silent no longer. He directed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, established in 1957 with King as the first president, to draft a statement protesting that the "promises of the Great Society top the casualty list of the conflict" in Vietnam.[32]

On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before the day of his assassination, King announced from the pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City that the war had left America's commitment to civil rights and social justice "broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war." Johnson's policies were "taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society" and sending them "eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem."

joined the Black Panthers, embracing anti-white violence and antisemitism as well). Riots erupted in cities across the nation. Throughout *The Deadly Bet* LaFeber draws on insights provided by British Ambassador Sir Patrick Dean in reports to London that chronicle the growing fissures in the African American community and US society as the Tocqueville problem festered and intensified. "[M]oderate Negro leaders' such as King [have] lost control" of the young, Dean reported. Then, after King's assassination, Dean quoted Carmichael's description of the assassination "as the biggest mistake white America had made, and as killing all reasonable hope for the future." Carmichael went on to warn, Dean continued, that the time had arrived "for the Negro to retaliate by getting guns and carrying out executions in the street."[34]

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LaFeber argues that the disaffection of so many African Americans with Johnson and his Great Society program of reform, for which the Vietnam War was pivotal, was fundamental to the unravelling of American society and democratic order in the 1960s. Still, another major theme of *The Deadly Bet* is that the white backlash. political polarization, and attendant violence produced by this rejection was most decisive in giving rise to Tocqueville's nightmarish scenario. La

While few of Wallace's supporters appreciated the relationship between the war in Vietnam and the social upheaval that they judged so threatening, LaFeber maintains that Wallace did. To be sure he does not claim that the Alabama governor, in contrast to the bookish Eugene McCarthy, read Tocqueville. Wallace was confident that faced with Black Power advocates and anti-war protestors, Americans would sacrifice their civil liberties in exchange for security. Previewing Donald Trump's campaign almost a half-century later, Wallace, according to LaFeber, posited that combining a populist program with police power was the most effective response to the Tocqueville problem. As Wallace saw it, "African Americans would probably have to surrender most of their recent gains and antiwar protesters would have to be quieted," but that was an "acceptable price to pay."[36]

That millions of Americans agreed is essential to LaFeber's narrative. Especially but not exclusively in the southern states, exacerbating Wallace voters' frustrated search for security was a concomitant belief in a zero-sum outcome that defined Black advances as White defeats. For this they blamed Johnson, LaFeber maintains. Many "whites, especially those who had less education and made low wages, believed Johnson's administration was unfairly trying to help people of color, often at the expense of whites," he writes. The perception grew progressively more pervasive, he continues, that "the riots, black nationalist demands, and growing violence in the cities had been shaped by Johnson's attempts to protect the civil rights of minorities, especially African Americans." The politically astute Johnson recognized the power and danger of this growing "white backlash." Fueled and fanned by Wallace's campaign in 1968, white fear and anger was "splitting the nation at a very critical time."[37]

In Wallace's success, LaFeber located a dystopian thread in American history presaged by the 1968 presidential campaign. Richard Nixon and his advisers, most prominently the young

conservatives Kevin Phillips and Patrick Buchanan, saw in Wallace's campaign the seeds of a "Southern strategy" that exploited racial animosity on both sides to turn the South Republican. After losing the 1958 governor's race to a more rabid segregationist, Wallace told an aide that he would never to be "out-niggered" again.[38] But as the Republican political consultant Lee Atwater would later argue, "You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract."[39]

Richard Nixon understood the need to use code words to provoke racism, so he stuck mostly to the language of "law and order." Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Mitch McConnell and almost all nationally-ambitious Republican politicians adopted this language in coded appeals to racist and racially motivated voters. Over time, the sheet dropped from their faces, and they spoke their truths. Surely Donald Trump never read The Deadly Bet. Still, he built on Wallace's racist rhetoric and preyed on white grievance; the Alabama segregationist and his 1968 campaign can now be seen as a prophecy of his presidency. Trump praised a murderous mob made up of neo-Nazis and Klan members and other proto-fascist "alt-right" leaders marching in Charlottesville as "very fine people," helping to lay the groundwork for the most violent attacks on police and others during Trump's coup attempt on January 6, 2021.

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These themes are central to American history, albeit sometimes only as undercurrents to the more visible parts. The intense and destructive polarization, which Tocqueville had anticipated in the 19th century, and which previewed America in the 21st century, framed the 1968 election. There are no heroes in LaFeber's account of it; he is critical of all the candidates. Yet he is sympathetic to the Democrats because of the analytic framework he constructs. All

were, to use LaFeber's word, "trapped" by the forces unleashed by the war and exploited by their Republican opponents. Johnson had bet that he could manage the war at a cost sufficiently low for him to continue to build a Great Society. Losing the bet cost him Black and White support for both the Great Society and for the war—and what's more, left no money in the budget for the enormously expensive domestic agenda he had in mind. Eventually, he just gave up, defeated by his own hubris, and walked away from the presidency.[40]

Eugene McCarthy, the most consistent opponent of the war among those covered in The Deadly Bet and conventionally portrayed as a loser, is to LaFeber the most conscious of and sensitive to the Tocqueville problem. "Like Tocqueville a century before, McCarthy had come to the conclusion that a long conflict undermined the nation's democratic principles—and . . . thus American freedom itself—by creating an all-powerful presidency," LaFeber explains. To McCarthy, Vietnam had turned into an "endless war that would allow that president to have even more power, while student movements took out their frustration by turning either dangerously to the left or opting out through a drug-infested counterculture." His overriding concern was Tocqueville's (and Bourne's): Finding a way to avert American democracy's corruption by a long war. His emphasis was on saving democracy, not winning the war. A decade later, McCarthy published a book comparing the current state of American democracy to what Tocqueville observed.[41]

McCarthy perceived Vietnam as integral to America's growing racial divide and inner-city rioting. The centralization of power in the executive branch and "militarization" of American life, manifest in "rising vigilantism," a "preoccupation" with "weapons of destruction," and the spread of "rifle clubs urging all civilians to be armed" were byproducts of the war. So was the proliferating drug culture. McCarthy judged "turn on, tune in, and drop out"

as a threat to democracy equal to that of the imperial presidency and the outsized influence of the military-industrial complex. LaFeber quotes extensively from McCarthy's 1968 campaign book: "For the first time since the Depression, Americans are asking whether our republic, as we know

voices of the poor and downcast—combined with the flashes he showed of his brother's charisma that led many liberals to believe that Kennedy alone had the potential to save the country from spinning off its axis into an abyss of nihilistic violence, social anarchy, and political reaction. Antiwar activists had been desperate for him to challenge Johnson, but he dithered, certain he'd have a better chance of winning in 1972 and concerned for his own safety. But as McCarthy was making his run for president known, RFK appeared on Face the Nation and ramped up his antiwar rhetoric: "Do we have the right here in the United States to say that we're going to kill tens of thousands, make millions of people, as we have, refugees, [and] kill women and children, as we have? I very seriously question whether we have the right."

were calling for change," he cried to thunderous applause, his fists in the air. "They are the ones, the President of this United States, President Johnson, they are ones who divide us"[47] Now came Johnson's new nightmare, in which he was again being chased by "a giant stampede" and "forced over the edge by rioting blacks, demonstrating students, marching welfare mothers, squawking professors and hysterical reporters." Next came the "final straw: The thing I feared from the first day of my presidency was actually coming true. Robert Kennedy had openly announced his intention to [illegible] in the memory of his brother. And the America[illegible]

assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, deprived America and the world of that chance and maybe its last, best hope.[51]

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The candidate who did emerge victorious from the raucous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago and the subject of The Deadly Bet's seventh chapter was Hubert Humphrey, the very embodiment of an American post-World War II liberalism that promoted government as the corrective to corporate greed, as a job creator, and as a provider of essential infrastructure. LaFeber labeled Humphrey a "national star." As a Minneapolis mayor running for the senate twenty years earlier, Humphrey had given one of American liberalism's most consequential speeches. Addressing the attendees of that year's Democratic Convention, he thundered, his voice pitched, his fist raised: "To those who say that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them, we are 172 years too late. To those who say that this civil rights program is an infringement of states' rights, the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the sunshine of human rights."[52] At barely more than eight minutes, it was among the shortest speeches of Humphrey's famously long-winded career—one that would eventually include twenty-six years in the Senate and four unsuccessful runs at the presidency—but it would transform the politics of civil rights in the Democratic Party forever. One would have to go as far back as William Jennings Bryan's 1896 "Cross of Gold" oration to find a single speech in the party's history that had galvanized so many people so powerfully on so central a political principle. And Humphrey's principle, unlike Bryan's, was a winner. The Democrats included the civil rights plank in the party's 1948 platform, leading to the departure of Strom Thurmond and the "Dixiecrats" who remained committed to white supremacy in the South and elsewhere.

But as Lyndon Johnson's vice-president, Humphrey in 1968 was caught in a vice grip of his boss' making. "I don't want loyalty," Johnson once told an aide. "I want him to kiss my ass in Macy's window at high noon and tell me it smells like roses."[53] Humphrey understood this, and as vice-president and presumed successor, he did his best to live up to Johnson's impossible demands. A die-hard cold warrior, Humphrey had resolutely stood by Johnson's side in waging war in Vietnam. Not only had Humphrey's anticommunism and loyalty to everything Johnson said and did wear thin by 1968, but also the president's refusal to go all in or all out on the war made Humphrey a target of the political left and as well as the right. LaFeber explains, liberals "were not used to strong, organized opposition on the left. . . . Now, under the impact of a growing antiwar movement and its belief that the Great Society program was inadequate, the left launched all-out attacks on Humphrey's liberalism on the streets and in university teach-ins." Caught in the throes of the Tocqueville problem, "Humphrey's lifelong political identity was under blistering attack."[54]

Unable to count on a shrinking liberal constituency, anathema to conservatives, and in almost all respects the odd man out in the Johnson administration, Humphrey had no choice but to suppress his doubts and support his president—as ardently on Vietnam as on the Great Society. The thousands of anti-war protestors who flooded the streets surrounding Grant Park across from the convention hall in Chicago therefore saw his first-ballot nomination as a bull Td[(acr)-1 (o)1 (sc

war in Vietnam and the breakdown of America's societal order. The Minnesotan has become "a symbol for antiwar riots on the streets."[55]

Humphrey's brand of liberalism played no better after Chicago. He was hoisted on the petard of an endless war that he had promoted; a belief in equality and opportunity with which he identified but seemed progressively more out of reach, particularly to the African Americans and other minorities that Humphrey had championed; and a safe, secure, and prosperous future that was under siege by core elements of his own political party. Humphrey confronted long odds on winning the presidency. Those odds were diminished further because he faced off against Richard Nixon.

Nixon, whom LaFeber examines in chapter 6, also benefited from Wallace's candidacy. Wallace's choice of Curtis LeMay as a running mate allowed Nixon to portray himself as the moderate alternative to Humphrey's allegedly defeatist policy. When asked at his first press conference as a candidate for vice president whether he would consider using nuclear weapons in Vietnam, LeMay, as quoted by LaFeber, replied, "I would use anything we could dream up. . . including nuclear weapons if it was necessary." Once president Nixon cultivated the image of a madman with his finger on the nuclear trigger as a negotiating tactic. During the campaign, however, it was Wallace and LeMay whom journalists dubbed the "bombsy twins."[56]

Nixon, counterintuitively with an assist from Wallace, adroitly exploited Humphrey's vulnerabilities. He did not need to disclose his "secret plan" to achieve a "peace with honor" in Vietnam because Humphrey could propose no plan that could avoid bringing down upon him the wrath of Lyndon Johnson. LaFeber points out that Humphrey's motivation for supporting the war so enthusiastically in 1968 was to "return to Johnson's good graces" after angering him earlier by "gently" suggesting the administration pursue a negotiated settlement--Johnson's

policy after he withdrew from the race himself. Making matters worse, Nixon was able to turn the tables on Humphrey's effort to "smoke out" his secret plan. In September Humphrey pledged

The day before the election, Johnson called in the members of his national security team to help him decide whether to go public with Nixon's subterfuge. Just as Barack Obama would choose to keep quiet about Russian interference in the presidential election of 2016, LBJ and his advisers chose not to risk appearing to throw the election. What's more, Johnson was hardly eager to reveal his own illegal domestic spying. Finally, it is far from clear that Johnson preferred a Humphrey victory to a Nixon one, because, ironically, he thought Nixon, the "peace candidate," less likely to give up on Vietnam than his own vice president. So the plot worked: South Vietnam boycotted the talks, which killed Humphrey's momentum and ensured Nixon's paper-thin electoral victory.[59]

LaFeber, accordingly, makes explicit that while Tocqueville may not have predicted Nixon's victory, he would not have been surprised by it.[60] Nor would the French aristocrat have been shocked by the fallout from the 9/11 attacks thirty-three years later. Not long after Al-Qaeda terrorists blasted the Pentagon and destroyed Manhattan's Twin Towers, the master historian returned to his time-honored theme of America's confrontation with the Tocqueville problem in order to make sense of where the nation stood as its leaders chose a path for its military response. "The trade-off of military needs, if this New War is to be successfully waged, against the requirement that Americans become associated with highly undemocratic, militaristic, even medieval, regimes," LaFeber insisted, "will have to be explained and debated. Likewise, the "tradeoff of internal security against the restriction of civil liberties (that panoply of liberties for which the war is allegedly being fought) will have to be explained and debated." And finally, the "simultaneous waging of the war against terrorism while carefully considering how Americans should think about other foreign policy problems, such as a rapidly changing China and an increasingly unstable Latin America, has to be explained and debated." LaFeber

concluded with elegant simplicity, “Doing all this simultaneously challenges the Tocqueville problem with a dangerous overload.”[61]

Under George W. Bush’s presidency, America failed LaFeber’s Tocqueville test no less spectacularly than it had under Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon in Vietnam; even more shamefully, perhaps, because it should have heeded the lessons of its previous misadventure. Then again, learning from the mistakes of the past, and applying appropriate lessons in the future, occurs with far greater frequency in the work of scholars—particularly careful, meticulous historians like Walter LaFeber—than in the policymaking of American politicians. It is for that reason, sadly that were he to have authored The Deadly Bet in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s 2016 election, his update of the original would have demanded only minor revisions. As he so aptly notes in the final sentence of this short, masterful study: “The Ghosts survived.”[62]

Endnotes

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[22] Walter F. LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion. 1860-1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 25th Anniversary Edition, 1998).

[23] Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *The Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 583-587.

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[25] Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson 3: Master of the Senate* (NY: Vintage, 2002), 910-89; quoted in Nicholas Lemann, *.24d*

[33] Quoted in Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 2.

[34] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 70, 77. On Carmichael see Perneil E. Joseph, *Stokely Carmichael: A Life* (NY: Basic

[53] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Fawcett, 1972), 434.

[54] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 120-21.

[55] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 128-130.

[56] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 140-41. On Nixon's effort to convince the North Vietnamese to accept US terms for a settlement in Vietnam or confront a madman in control of America's nuclear arsenal, see p. 110 and Zachary Jonathan Jacobson, *On Nixon's Madness: An Emotional History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).

[57] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 122, 131. LaFeber covers Thieu's efforts to sabotage the peace negotiations in his chapter on Thieu in *Deadly Bet*, 155-65.

[58] John A. Farrell, "Nixon's Vietnam Treachery," *New York Times*, December 31, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/31/opinion/sunday/nixons-vietnam-treachery.html; Peter Baker, "Nixon Tried to Spoil Johnson's Vietnam Peace Talks in '68, Notes Show," *New York Times*, January 2, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/us/politics/nixon-tried-to-spoil-johnsons-vietnam-peace-talks-in-68-notes-show.html; and John A. Farrell, "When a Candidate Conspired with a Foreign Power to Win an Election," *Politico*, August 6, 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/06/nixon-vietnam-candidate-conspired-with-foreign-power-win-election-215461.

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[60] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 13.

[61] Walter LaFeber, "Tocqueville, Powell, Miller, and September 11," *Historically Speaking* 3 (November 2001): 9-10.

[62] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 179