

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

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

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 ~~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,

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

God Called

In the premodern 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 hoteliers 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 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," 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 ~~start~~ 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 at 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, or 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: 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 ~~disc~~ ~~disc~~. Few overzealous 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~~ 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

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 1960s. My 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 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.

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.

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-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 around 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 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. On retirement (sr)2 (p. On retirement)4-2 ((l)-1 e w)3 s1. rtherhhu4-1 (l)-1 (c

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Speaking for myself, the results were ~~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, ~~he~~ 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 ~~cares~~ really cared 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, ~~he~~ I organized a session on the CIA operations in Guatemala and Cuba for the 1980 OAH meeting ~~in~~ in CIA. 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~~ done with me.

It took baseball for our relationship to ~~recover~~ 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,

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

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~~ 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 ~~from~~ mail 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 ~~talk~~ 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

politically (while nevertheless remaining subtle and unpredictable in his politics), that kind and generous

So, I opened the LOR. There I was summed up perfectly, in that clear, crisp LaFeber 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.