

Chapter Six

Thinking about Democracy: *Inevitable Revolutions*

Lorena Oropeza and James F. Siekmeier

In June 1982, Walter LaFeber wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* entitled “Inevitable Revolutions,” arguing that US policies in Central America had “encouraged what they are supposed to prevent.” The article indicted Ronald Reagan’s policies toward Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala for fomenting revolution. Blighted by an “ignorance of history,” Reagan and his closest advisors were clinging to the same premises that had undermined John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress twenty years before: first, that free markets automatically led to free and democratic governments; and second, that economic progress and political stability depended upon eliminating leftist dissent. Meant to stymie the appeal of a Castro-like revolution, the Alliance for Progress had offered Latin American countries massive economic and military aid and the promise of a brighter future. Instead, LaFeber argued, the Alliance had raised expectations only to crush them, widening the chasm between the rich and the poor in country after country while training national militaries that tortured and killed their own people. Such circumstances inevitably fueled support for leftist revolution, the opposite of the original intention of the Alliance for Progress. Historically, nowhere was US power more pervasive than in Central America. And nowhere were the ravages of political upheaval and economic chaos triggered by US interference more apparent.¹

With the *Atlantic* article, LaFeber entered contemporary policy debates by deliberately intervening in the nation’s understanding of US-Central American relations. He intervened in three ways. First, he provided a much needed and accessible historical context to the current

crisis. The “Inevitable Revolutions” article appeared when the Reagan administration was seeking to topple triumphant Sandinista revolutionaries in Nicaragua, quash left-wing guerrillas in El Salvador, and keep arms flowing to generals in Guatemala who were confronting unprecedented indigenous protest. Second, as in his analysis of the gap between the purported aims of the Alliance for Progress and its negative effects, LaFeber carefully exposed an inherent contradiction in US policies toward Central America: the United States actually bred the revolutions it hoped to avert. Third, with the memories of the Vietnam War still raw, the article served as a call to action, one that encouraged an end to contemporary interventions in Central America by exposing how Reagan and his advisors were repeating the mistakes of their predecessors. “With luck and an understanding of the past,” LaFeber concluded, the United States could end its long-standing complicity in regional upheaval and exploitation.²

The three interventions found in the 1982 *Atlantic* article permeated LaFeber’s work regarding Central America. The article served as the genesis for a book with the same title published the following year. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* expanded the scope of the original article both temporally and geographically. Starting with the late 18th century and extending to the moment of publication, the book examined US interactions with Costa Rica and Honduras as well as with Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. All these nations, LaFeber contended, were trapped in a system that he called “neo-dependency,” through which the United States exerted tremendous economic, military, and political influence and control while Central Americans suffered.³ LaFeber’s involvement with current policy, moreover, began before *Inevitable Revolutions*. Another work, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical* that would return the Panama Canal to Panamanians. Taking a long view again—the first chapter opened with the Spanish explorer Balboa—LaFeber offered a persuasive case in

favor of the treaty and on behalf of Panamanian nationalism. For good measure, he blasted *anti-treaty* arguments in the book's conclusion.⁴

A sign of their continued relevance, both books merited second editions. A 1989 edition of *The Panama Canal* dissected the rise of Manuel Noriega, the Panamanian dictator who was both a US ally in the war against the Sandinistas and a US foe in the “war against drugs.”⁵ Likewise containing a decade's worth of new material, the second edition of *Inevitable Revolutions* in 1993 covered the blood-soaked 1980s as the contra war raged in Nicaragua and civil war continued to engulf El Salvador.⁶ It confirmed, in fact, what the *Atlantic* article had predicted yet sought to avoid: decades of US policy culminating in yet more chaos, violence, and poverty throughout the isthmus.

These works exemplified LaFeber's role as a scholar aiming to inform political debates and shift policy. Although he no doubt would have rejected the moniker “scholar-activist” as overtly political and too rooted in the present for a historian, the term accurately captures the broader impact of his work. In introducing an unfamiliar history to US readers, he dispelled ignorance. By providing a critical reading of US foreign policy objectives and outcomes, he challenged American citizens—including members of the Reagan administration—to grapple with the power that their nation wielded in the world for good and, all too often, for ill. By engaging in ongoing policy debates, he cultivated the hope that an informed, educated citizenry might effect change. Together these scholarly interventions revealed how he defined his role as a historian of US foreign relations.

LaFeber's writings on Central America also captured his own complex views of US-style democracy. On the one hand, the sense of urgency with which he wrote signaled a fundamental belief in the American system of government. On the other, he clearly saw democracy as a

fragile enterprise at home and abroad. In his books on Central America, as in his other works, LaFeber warned of the erosion of individual liberties given the tendency of power to concentrate in the hands of the executive, no more so than when conducting foreign affairs. Privately, he also worried about the erosion of democratic norms in general within the United States. In terms of inter-American relations, the implication was clear. With US democracy still a work in progress at home, what business did Americans have trying to export it abroad? Skeptical of the American habit of demanding free elections in other nations, as if elections by themselves had the power to function as a societal panacea or offered certain proof of a just society, LaFeber maintained that in Central America only “fundamental structural change” could address “gross inequities” and stop those inevitable revolutions.⁷

An Unfamiliar History

In *Inevitable Revolutions*, LaFeber juggled the tumultuous histories of five individual countries with the jagged contours of US foreign relations since 1776. On the US side, the book traced the multiple motivations underlying US actions against an international backdrop that shifted from British dominance in the 19th century to Cold War concerns in the 20th. LaFeber also drew attention to an array of actors within each Central American country across time, including military officers, oligarchs, students, unionists, campesinos, indigenous people, religious folks, and armed rebels.⁸ At the same time, LaFeber carefully distinguished amongst the five countries in terms of racial composition, class stratification, geography, and economic resources. He organized all this information not only around a powerful thesis critical of the role of the United States in Central America but also with a clear sense of purpose, to reach as many people as possible about “the impact of US policies on the peoples and institutions of Central America.”⁹ Potential readers for *Inevitable Revolutions* included policymakers, students and their instructors,

activists, and everyday US citizens who might have been vaguely aware that their country was deeply engaged in several countries south of Mexico but had little understanding as to why.

Orienting US readers was a chief concern. The book started with a “capsule view” circa 1980 of each Central American country: a brief paragraph that highlighted turning points and tragedies in each nation’s history accompanied by a handful of data points that underscored the tremendous societal differences between the Colossus of the North and the nations of Central America. The data points included rates of illiteracy (50 percent to 70 percent everywhere but Costa Rica, where it hovered around 10 percent), per capita income (ranging between \$640 and \$1,520 a year), and land mass (these were small nations roughly comparable to the size of various US states).¹⁰ Together, these capsule views introduced readers to the heartbreaking violence and poverty that had plagued Central America historically and that continued to the present day. They also suggested the massive role that the United States had played in Central American affairs for the past 100 years.

Maps amplified the message about US power while also exposing readers to an unfamiliar geography. “Throughout the twentieth century,” LaFeber noted, “the overwhelming number of North Americans could not have identified each of the five Central American nations on a map, let alone ticked off the region's sins that called for an application of US force.”¹¹ Conveying the proximity of Central America to the United States, a map of the Caribbean Basin, spread across two entire pages, greeted readers almost as soon as they opened the book. Each chapter began with a similarly sized map, which served as a visual summary of that chapter’s contents by noting the location and date of key events. Individually, the maps conveyed just how *busy* the United States had been in Central America at any given time. Seen successively, they

confirmed a disturbing and presumably interlocking pattern of US intervention and regional upheaval stretching across a century.

LaFeber, nevertheless, chose to begin his history further back in time, in 1776. Beyond a familiar reference point for US readers, this periodization allowed LaFeber to distinguish between two types of revolutions: the American Revolution versus the radical leftist revolutions then occurring in Central America. In 1776, he explained, Americans broke away from Britain in the name of individual liberty. Without an aristocracy, they had launched an unprecedented experiment in democracy. Americans, “especially if they were white and male,” he wrote, enjoyed a “rough equality.” For those who enjoyed the freedom to move, moreover, a landed frontier rich with possibility beckoned. In contrast, Central America had been an economic backwater throughout the colonial period. A tiny population of wealthy landowners profiting from the work of others made for highly stratified societies. Tellingly, Central Americans finally broke from Spain in 1821 not in the name of individual freedom but as a backlash to liberal reforms emanating from the mother country.

From these different starting points, the histories of the United States and Central America continued to diverge over the course of the 19th century. While the isthmus remained poor and vulnerable, the United States emerged as a continental empire, a leading industrial power, and after 1898, an overseas empire by acquiring Spain’s last colonies, the Philippines and Puerto Rico and by exerting, as sanctioned by the Platt Amendment, routine interference in Cuba. In Central America, the United States had the luxury of exerting tremendous power without formal acquisition and sans any Platt Amendment. Working closely with each nation’s elites, the first US investments in coffee and bananas began in the 1890s.¹² To protect those investments and to keep the Caribbean an “American lake,” the United States in the decades that

followed secured economic concessions, backed politicians who did what Washington wanted, wrangled a canal, and, when all else failed to protect US interests, sent in the Marines.

Military intervention completed a massive switch in US history, according to LaFeber. A revolution fought in the name of individual liberty had made the United States “the world’s leading revolutionary nation” at its birth, he wrote. By the 20th century, however, the United States had “turned away from revolution toward the defense of oligarchs” in Central America and elsewhere.¹³ The partners of US investors, these oligarchs needed defending because the benefits of capitalism were so unequally distributed in their respective countries. In the United States, relative prosperity had enshrined the free market as the economic counterpart to political liberty and credited capitalism with helping create a large and politically stabilizing middle class. In Central America, capitalism reaped the reverse. The rise of export economies ensured that what little wealth remained in each country remained concentrated in the hands of a small elite who stayed in power through brutal repression if necessary. Consequently, LaFeber explained, revolution became one way, and at times seemingly the only way, to force political change in Central America. Not surprisingly given the vast class divisions, contemporary revolutionary movements on the isthmus—far removed in time and place from 1776—also tended to be anti-capitalistic.

To drive home this analysis, the introduction offered one more crucial learning aid: LaFeber coined the term “neodependency” to describe the relationship between the United States and Central American nations. Here he borrowed from Latin American dependency theorists who in previous decades had argued that development and underdevelopment were “two sides of the same coin,” that is, the same capitalist system that created wealth for some nations generated poverty for others primarily because wealthy, more powerful nations, determined the prices paid

for export crops, such as the bananas and coffee that Central American nations produced.¹⁴ Yet as LaFeber noted, Central Americans experienced plenty of US military intervention and political pressure too. He employed the term “neodependency” to describe a multifaceted system of US informal control. For LaFeber, an emphasis on economic relations alone did not suffice to capture the many manifestations of US power in Central America.

As an additional boon to readers, the notion of neodependency operating as a system of informal control arranged the book’s many moving parts into a neatly structured narrative arc. The system needed to be set up (Chapter 1), maintained (Chapter 2), and updated (Chapter 3) before finally collapsing in the wake of the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution (Chapter 4) and leaving the Reagan administration to confront, in the first edition’s fifth and final chapter, “The Remains of the System.” What came next? In the revised and expanded second edition, a new Chapter 6 entitled, somewhat awkwardly, “Rearranging the Remains of the System,” did. As an organizing principle for the book, “neodependency” allowed LaFeber expertly to guide his readers through the rise and relative decline of US power in the region.

Yet this idea also generated significant criticism.

A Controversial Analysis

LaFeber had first grappled with explaining unequal power relations between the United States and Central America in his Panama Canal book published five years before. At the time, no other book written in English or Spanish detailed the history of US relations with Panama. Yet a lack of knowledge, or what LaFeber flatly termed “vast ignorance,” hardly precluded *norteamericanos* from forming strong feelings about the canal. LaFeber approvingly quoted a US Canal Zone officer in the preface: “We believe that 80 percent of Americans agree with us that we must keep the Canal under our control. Unfortunately, half of those Americans are not

sure where the Panama Canal is located.” Eager to contribute to the ongoing debate about the fate of the canal, LaFeber rapidly produced what he modestly termed “only a survey,” one organized around a few key themes, among them that Panama did not owe its existence to Theodore Roosevelt and that, “contrary to Reagan’s statements,” the United States did not buy the canal in 1903 or ever own it.¹⁵

Describing the US-Panamanian relationship in the affirmative, however, proved tougher. As LaFeber noted elsewhere, Panama’s history set it apart from the other five Central American nations that he later focused on in *Inevitable Revolutions*. In 1903, Panama broke away from Columbia, not Spain. Afterward, the new nation was even more tightly integrated into the American empire than its Central American neighbors. A 1903 treaty permitted the United States to act “as if it were the sovereign” in the 10-mile-wide Canal Zone “in perpetuity” and charged the United States with protecting Panamanian independence (in effect sanctioning a US right of intervention).¹⁶ In short order, the United States also gained military bases, ownership of the nation’s communication and transportation networks, and control over the economy. In Panama, the US dollar was (and is) legal tender. Control of the canal also granted the United States access to the country’s primary revenue-generating stream. Despite subsequent treaties and memorandums of understanding, moreover, US control of the canal remained non-negotiable for most US citizens for most of the 20th century. Among those most resistant to change were US canal workers and their families who lived happily segregated lives in the Canal Zone, a place where they enjoyed vastly better homes, schools, and pay than most Panamanians.¹⁷

With some hesitation, LaFeber settled on describing the relationship between the two countries as “informal colonialism.” In the text, he cited Rupert Emerson’s definition of colonialism as an apt characterization of “Washington’s ties with Panama.” A scholar of

international relations and political science, Emerson defined colonialism as “the establishment and maintenance, for an extended time, of rule over an alien people that is separate from and subordinate to the ruling power.” In further noting that colonialism was “white rule” over non-whites, moreover, Emerson paid attention to racism. So did LaFeber.¹⁸ Still, in the absence of any formal recognition by the United States of Panama as a colony, LaFeber favored the term “informal colonialism.” Yet he did not stop there.

Contrary to his own advice to avoid long citations, at this point in the text a footnote nearly a page long appeared. In it, LaFeber took the time to explain why he favored “informal colonialism” over “dependency;” the former, he wrote, “*seems* [italics added] a more accurate description.” To explain his reasoning, LaFeber inserted a popular definition of dependency by Theotonio Dos Santos, a Brazilian economist and one of the founders of dependency theory. Dos Santos stressed the interdependence of development and underdevelopment and the subjugation of poorer nations by richer ones.¹⁹ In contrast, not only did LaFeber see US power operating beyond the economic realm, but he also argued that dependency failed to account for the range of interactions between developed and less developed countries.²⁰ LaFeber’s concept of “neodependency,” which played such a prominent role in *Inevitable Revolutions*, emerged from this key insight.

The footnote contained another reason why LaFeber rejected “dependency.” Simply put, the United States treated Panama in a way it would never dare treat the powerful Southern Cone nations of Argentina, Brazil, or Chile. LaFeber revisited this idea too in *Inevitable Revolutions* when he stated that the frequency with which the United States resorted to military intervention in the region distinguished US relations with Central American countries, and with Caribbean ones too, from the rest of Latin America.²¹ Still, an air of uncharacteristic tentativeness

accompanied his initial grappling with dependency theory. As a non-Latin Americanist, LaFeber admitted, he was still a learner. He concluded the footnote by thanking his “most helpful” Cornell colleague, Thomas Holloway, for his “continued and often unavailing efforts . . . to initiate me into the mysteries of dependency theory.”²²

That LaFeber felt the need to explain his rejection of dependency theory speaks to the popularity of this set of ideas at the time he wrote. Dependency theory originated in Latin America as an alternative to 1960s modernization theory. As articulated by Walt Rostow, an economist who worked in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, modernization theory proposed that capitalist development occurred along a series of stages. While Western countries had reached the highest stage of development, or what Rostow called the era of “high mass consumption,” other, poorer, countries, like those in Latin America, had yet to reach “take-off.”²³ The built-in biases were hard to ignore. By viewing capitalism as a phenomenon that occurred strictly *within* nations, modernization theory conveniently suggested that some countries—and implicitly some people—were more backward than others. Latin American scholars (some of whom, like Dos Santos, were Marxists) rejected that premise. They countered by coming up with a set of insights, eventually known as “dependency theory,” that prioritized the economic relationship *between* countries. To quote LaFeber quoting the theorists, they proposed that “development and underdevelopment were two components ‘of one unified system.’”²⁴ They disagreed as to what came next. More radical *dependentistas* advocated leftist revolution as the only means of escaping capitalist exploitation.²⁵

LaFeber did not. Still, the term “neodependency” was close enough to “dependency” according to the critics who attacked him for daring to use an idea so closely associated with a leftist intellectual tradition. In a particularly harsh assessment by Robert Freeman Smith that

appeared in *Reviews in American History*, LaFeber stood accused of offering a “totally deterministic interpretation of history by following the neo-Leninist, ‘dependency’ theory to explain everything about Central American history.” Although Smith had been LaFeber’s graduate classmate at Wisconsin, his politics had subsequently swerved aggressively to the right. To Smith, *Inevitable Revolutions* offered a simple “story of domination and exploitation” in which only the drive to “advance and protect capitalist interests in the region” motivated the United States.²⁶

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in a review that appeared in the *Washington Post*, likewise found fault with LaFeber’s work. Schlesinger had been a special assistant to the president on Latin American affairs during the Kennedy administration, the same administration that, in LaFeber’s view, was responsible for the massively ineffectual Alliance for Progress.²⁷ In a defensive ploy, Schlesinger chided LaFeber by posing a rhetorical question. “Does anyone suppose that, if the United States had been a communist state from the start, it would not still have insisted on dominating Central America,” he asked, “and have done so even more crudely and brutally?” Ignoring what the *actual* United States had done in Central America, the question strongly suggested that LaFeber was overly critical of US actions. In contrast, Schlesinger described LaFeber’s “invocation of dependency theory” as entirely “uncritical.”²⁸ LaFeber’s careful distinction between “neodependency” and “dependency” was lost to both reviewers.

Despite their criticism, LaFeber never marched along a determined path dictated by any theory. Certainly, LaFeber took pride in elevating economics within the study of US diplomatic history. As he once wrote, adopting that approach at the beginning of his career made him and his like-minded colleagues “heretics in a field that always seems in need of a few more.”²⁹ Comfortable being a “revisionist”—he once said that all good historians were—LaFeber

nonetheless tended to shy away from the word “theory” (and any accompanying mysteries).³⁰

The smallest details matter here. Only once in his work on Central America did he even mention “a theory called ‘dependency’,” a turn of phrase that still contained a bit of distancing.³¹

Otherwise, he referred to “dependency” alone versus “dependency theory.” Equally telling in this context was his choice to define neodependency more vaguely as a “system” versus a “theory.”

Terminology aside, neither idea provided a “testable hypothesis” with any predictive value.

Instead, LaFeber took what James Mahoney and Diana Rodríguez-Franco characterized as a

“theory frame” approach to the Latin American scholarship that informed his work. He gained a

“series of orienting concepts” and “general questions for analysis” not a rigid set of

assumptions.³² In sum, LaFeber borrowed from Latin American theorists, but he never aspired to

join their ranks. As a historian of US foreign relations, he sought to deliver a blistering critique

and analysis of US interventions in Central America based upon the demonstrated evidence of

their impact. Neodependency was his means to that end.

All hesitation gone, LaFeber’s forthright use of neodependency in *Inevitable Revolutions*

allowed him to expand the *Atlantic* thesis backward in time. In the book, the Alliance for

Progress still acted as a key pivot point, a last-ditch attempt to save a system about to collapse

under the weight of its own contradictions. But LaFeber now introduced another contradiction,

or tension, that dated back to the nation’s Founders. Thomas Jefferson liked to talk about an “an

empire of liberty,” but championing self-determination soon fell to the wayside as the United

States expanded across a continent and then projected its power overseas.³³ The long view

illuminated enduring themes in US foreign relations as they pertained to Central America. John

Quincy Adams’s doubts about the likelihood that newly-independent Latin American nations

would ever follow the democratic example of the United States— “arbitrary power, both military

and ecclesiastical, was stamped on their education, upon all their habits, and upon their institutions,” he once wrote—foreshadowed the reluctance of Washington DC to view Latin Americans as the cultural equals of Anglo-Americans. Similarly, James Polk’s aggressive war against Mexico in 1848 portended the unequal power relationship between the United States and Central American nations.³⁴

As LaFeber noted, the United States intervened militarily in Central America no fewer than 20 times between 1898 and 1920.³⁵ In “Setting Up the System,” he explained why: Washington came to see political volatility in Central America as a threat to its own regional dominance. Extra-hemispheric powers might see regional unrest as an opportunity to expand their influence by, for example, by forcibly taking over the custom houses of a nation that was not paying back its debts. To prevent this scenario, Theodore Roosevelt claimed international police power and sent in the Marines.³⁶ Critical of such a rough approach, Woodrow Wilson advocated self-determination but eventually sent in even more Marines.³⁷ For both Progressive-era presidents, LaFeber wrote, the desire for order over chaos translated into favoring order over self-determination. Order was good for US investments, good for US strategic control, and, the thinking went, good for Central Americans who might at some later date be ready to participate in a US-style democracy.

By the 1920s, US policymakers grew increasingly concerned about their nation’s reputation on the world stage. In wielding a big stick, it had appeared to be a big bully. The Good Neighbor Policy of Franklin Roosevelt, LaFeber asserted, resolved the contradiction between championing self-determination and exerting control in the most cynical way possible. New police forces like the National Guard in Nicaragua were now charged with the job of maintaining order. If they killed or tortured their own people, no matter. Under the banner of the “good

neighbor,” the United States suddenly began championing self-determination once again and proclaiming the virtues of non-intervention.³⁸

For LaFeber, the final step in setting up the system of neodependency, and the chief accomplishment of the Good Neighbor policy, was the rise of military dictatorships that stood ready to quiet domestic unrest. By the close of the 1930s, he noted, military men ruled four out of five Central American nations, not coincidentally the same ones where “2% of the population controlled the land and hence the lives of the other 98%.” Costa Rica, with a greater tradition of representative government and more equitable land redistribution, was the only exception. But there too, the United States exerted tremendous power. Throughout the isthmus, the US priority was to keep neodependency operating.³⁹ On the eve of World War II, the future looked bright from the perspective of Washington. As a system of informal economic and military control, LaFeber wrote, neodependency “looked like it could go on forever.”⁴⁰

Instead, the second contradiction inherent in the system of neodependency dominated the postwar period. As LaFeber had argued in the *Atlantic*, US foreign policies bred precisely the type of revolution that US policymakers hoped to avert. A close call occurred in Guatemala in 1954. During the 1930s, LaFeber wrote, Guatemala was a “case study” of how neodependency ensured US objectives without the burden of formal colonialism.⁴¹ It was also a military dictatorship. The Guatemalan Revolution of 1944, however, launched an unprecedented era of democracy that lasted for ten years. In 1950, “the freest elections in the country’s history” put Jacobo Arbenz, a champion of land reform, in the presidential palace. At the time, roughly half the country’s agricultural population eked a living on about 4 percent of the land. In contrast, the United Fruit Company owned approximately 42 percent. The poorest of Guatemala’s poor, overwhelmingly of indigenous descent and landless, meanwhile endured working conditions that

kept them all but enslaved. A 1952 law that Arbenz backed sought to redistribute wealth through land reform. A middle-of-the-road proposition given the country's vast inequities, the law called for the expropriation only of uncultivated lands and contained provisions to compensate landowners.⁴² Such details hardly mattered to US policymakers determined to maintain a system of neodependency.

Convinced that Arbenz's agenda smacked of communism, and in a decision as far removed from self-determination as possible, the Eisenhower administration authorized a coup. With the covert help of the Central Intelligence Agency, a Guatemalan general swiftly replaced Arbenz. Afterward John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's secretary of state, went on national television to "congratulate the Guatemalan people" for thwarting "the evil purpose of the Kremlin to destroy the inter-American system."⁴³ Yet, contrary to Dulles' post-facto spin, the Kremlin did not pose a threat. Nor did a one-time shipment of arms from Czechoslovakia. On this point, LaFeber and Eisenhower's military strategists were in accord.⁴⁴ The real threat to US interests, LaFeber argued, were Guatemalan reforms that, in his words, "pecked at" private property ownership.⁴⁵

Five years later, the Cuban revolution directly inspired the Alliance for Progress. Designed to thwart the appeal of communism as a model of change, the Alliance for Progress promised to invest roughly \$20 billion of US funding in Latin America to spur peaceful development and socio-economic reform along capitalist-friendly lines. Unfortunately, it failed to deliver on its promises several times over, LaFeber wrote. First, truly impressive statistics of per capita growth rate during the 1960s in Central American countries masked growing economic inequality, as US aid went overwhelmingly to US firms or familiar oligarchs, ensuring the continued concentration of wealth. Second, the Alliance for Progress spurred the movement

of people from the countryside to the city. Some moved expecting the Alliance to produce new industrial jobs (it failed to do so), while others were pushed off the land as export crop production expanded. An impoverished, disappointed population concentrated in urban areas, LaFeber points out, was one ripe for radicalization. Third, the Alliance for Progress as a program of economic aid lasted only for the Kennedy administration. Lyndon Johnson, distracted by Vietnam, soon tipped the scales toward military aid almost exclusively. Conveniently, the Pentagon's School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone had been churning out hundreds of US-trained Latin American army officers, groomed to protect Central American elites and advance US interests, since 1946.⁴⁶ The upshot? A decade after the launch of the Alliance for Progress, Central American societies were still grotesquely stratified, and the populations of each country, again with the sole exception of Costa Rica, more at the mercy of their own brutal militaries than ever before. In Guatemala, violent uprisings of indigenous peoples by the 1970s could also be traced to decades of repression conducted by post-coup military governments.

The United States could not find an alternative way forward even as the system veered toward collapse. To the surprise of some reviewers, LaFeber's neodependency thesis prompted him to condemn the policies of Jimmy Carter just as vigorously as those of Ronald Reagan.⁴⁷ The problem with Carter's human rights emphasis, LaFeber argued, was that it was mostly talk. In a damning assessment considering his prior analysis, he wrote that it was "the moral equivalent of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress."⁴⁸ As another quality that LaFeber brought to the task of telling the multifaceted story of US-Central American relations was the clarity of his writing, his comparison of how both Kennedy and Carter futilely sought a non-existent middle ground in Central America warrants quoting at length:

Both men talked about revolution when they meant painfully slow evolution. Both men desired more democratic societies in Central America as rapidly as possible but without the radical changes that those desires entailed. Both wanted the military-oligarch elites, long nourished by and dependent on the United States, to share power and distribute the wealth more equitably, but neither wanted to lose US power and influence that had always worked though those elites. Both men wanted change in Central America, but they dreaded revolution. In the end, when they realized that one was not possible without the other, both presidents backed away from the consequences [of their calls for change].⁴⁹

As was the case with Wilson half a century earlier, Kennedy and Carter said one thing but did another, a combination that always earned some of LaFeber's sharpest criticism. Not that Reagan was spared. While Reagan claimed that the Soviet Union "lay behind all the unrest in the world," LaFeber, looking at the evidence, dismissed that proposition as misguided, as much so during the 1980s as it had been during the 1950s. But that was not the only mistake that Reagan seemed doomed to repeat. The reification of the free market and reliance on military power ensured that the United States was still committed to a system of neodependency that made Central American revolutions inevitable.

Ironically LaFeber's expert analysis of the devastating role the United States historically had played in Central America left him open to a second set of criticisms. Some reviewers charged that Lafeber focused too much on the US side of the story. They noted, for example, the relative absence of Spanish-language sources. In fact, nowadays writing a book on the history of

US-Central American relations without accessing Latin American archives would be a tough sell to a publisher. More broadly, however, the criticism mimicked one that was soon directed at dependency theory itself. By emphasizing how economic relations trapped Latin Americans in a system of exploitation, the argument went, the concept failed to leave them much agency.⁵⁰ Similarly, other reviewers contended that in demonstrating the overwhelming nature of US power, LaFeber had diminished the role that Latin Americans played in their own history and presented them mainly as victims.⁵¹

LaFeber's books were more complex than that. On the one hand, he did show Latin Americans vigorously acting to advance their own interests. Tellingly, each chapter in the Panama Canal book was organized around the intersecting narratives of three men. As a result, Panamanian leaders centered the narrative as much as American presidents did. Elsewhere in Central America, those "military-oligarchy elites" who had long partnered with the United States also provided a constant source of consternation. Determined to protect their own privilege, they threw up roadblocks to halt even the most modest socio-economic reforms that the United States proposed. Moreover, although the United States designed the Organization of American States to keep hemispheric matters under US control (and beyond United Nations oversight), Latin American member nations were quick to use the forum in ways that ran counter to US priorities, by investigating human rights abuses by Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza in 1978, for example.⁵² By the 1970s, moreover, Mexico and Venezuela had stepped up as two Latin American countries that, by pursuing their own foreign policy objectives, were offering an "alternative" to the US system in Central America.⁵³ By the 1980s, tiny Costa Rica was spearheading a regional peace process much to the displeasure of the Reagan administration.⁵⁴

On the other hand, LaFeber may not have portrayed Central Americans as passive, but he most assuredly presented many who lived in the regions as victims targeted by the hemisphere's one and only superpower working in cooperation (most of the time), with each country's elites. Here LaFeber's attentiveness to how US-style racism shaped and misshaped the relationship between the United States and Central American nations merits mention. Demonstrating that his concept of neodependency was an expansive one, he traced how, despite different ideas about race and race-mixing, the power elite in the United States often found common ground with similarly-hued economic and political elites in Central America to the detriment of darker-skinned folks. In Panama, for example, where the local population resented the importation of West Indian workers to the Canal Zone, anti-blackness became an occasion for bonding between two presidents.⁵⁵ At other times, LaFeber noted, the United States abandoned nuance in favor of assuming widespread Latin American racial inferiority, elites included. Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 corollary emerged from a conviction that Latin American governments throughout the Caribbean Basin were "small bandit nests of the wicked and inefficient type" incapable of self-rule.⁵⁶ Again assuming blanket inferiority, and augmenting anti-American sentiment, the Canal Zone's two-tiered salary system paid all Panamanians less than "white" workers until the 1950s.⁵⁷

Most tragically, LaFeber linked racism to widespread death and destruction. Put aside debates about agency: dead people have none. All too often, he reminded readers, US priorities, by supporting right-wing repression and fueling left-wing upheaval, cost Central Americans their lives. Repeatedly pointing out instances of torture and death inflicted by US-supported military forces, LaFeber lamented the bloodshed. He called out suffering. And he assigned blame. In the second edition, a single understated sentence summarized LaFeber's disgust with eight years of

the Reagan administration's failed attempts to topple the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the destabilizing consequences that reverberated elsewhere in Central America as a result. "As North Americans debated and escalated," he wrote, "Central Americans grew poorer and died."⁵⁸

In short, LaFeber paid attention to the historic cheapness of brown lives.

A Scholar-Activist

In a 1984 review of Tom Buckley's *Violent Neighbors: El Salvador, Central America, and the United States* in the *Washington Post*, LaFeber praised the journalist for providing "some of the most powerful writing yet published on the charnel houses of El Salvador and Guatemala that pass as Central American governments." LaFeber counterpoised the Reagan administration's sanitized reference to the "unlawful and arbitrary deprivation of life" to Buckley's graphic description of a "disposal site" in a country where 40,000 people had already lost their lives to right-wing repression. There, Buckley wrote, the countless victims, male and female, young and old, carried on their bodies evidence of rape, torture, and mutilation. "For death squads" in El Salvador, LaFeber wrote, "death is not enough."⁵⁹

This level of seemingly endless violence, and US complicity in it, inspired LaFeber to write and revise *Inevitable Revolutions*. In a closely related proposition, he sought to end US military interference in the region. LaFeber wrote the bulk of *Inevitable Revolutions* between 1981 and 1983 in direct response to the ratcheting up of tensions that had accompanied Ronald Reagan's election in 1980. Direct US military involvement in Central America suddenly seemed much more possible given Reagan's hardline anti-communist stance. The question was whether events in Central America proved such a threat to US national security that a military response was required. To LaFeber, the answer was "no." Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista leader, to paraphrase a LaFeberian insight, was no Adolf Hitler.⁶⁰ As LaFeber knew all too well, moreover,

military intervention risked turning into an unjustifiable slog. After William Howard Taft sent US troops to Nicaragua in 1911, they stayed until 1925, only to return the following year and remain until 1933. In 1975, just a few years before LaFeber began writing *Inevitable Revolutions*, a decade of massive US military intervention in Vietnam had finally and ingloriously ended.

Such was the backdrop to LaFeber's activist scholarship. A response to contemporary debates, his work on Central America stood out for its urgency and drive; in these texts, LaFeber met a critical need. Just as *The Panama Canal* helped educate the American public about the waterway's history at a time when no other similar book, or book on Panamanian history for that matter, existed, when LaFeber wrote *Inevitable Revolutions*, historical monographs regarding US relations with any Central American nation except Guatemala were scant.⁶¹ One of the few historians who had published on the Caribbean region as a whole, including Central America, was Dana G. Munro, who earlier in his career had worked at the State Department implementing some of the same early 20th century policies that he later wrote about. Suffice it to say that his perspective, particularly in eschewing the role of economics, was much less critical than LaFeber's.⁶²

To LaFeber, however, recording events in line with Washington's interpretations and priorities, absent any critical analysis, betrayed the responsibility of a professional historian. For that reason, a rush of popular self-congratulatory histories about American foreign policy and policymakers that accompanied the end of the Cold War failed to impress him. "Triumphalism always sells better than negativism," he dismissively commented.⁶³ Like Fred Harvey Harrington, his mentor at Wisconsin, and like Carl Becker, Harrington's mentor at Cornell, LaFeber was predisposed "to think otherwise" regarding US foreign policy.

Harrington, Becker, and other “Progressive historians” insisted that change was possible, particularly if a more educated public could counter the power of economic elites. Yet despite foregrounding class conflict in their work, they did not advocate it. Instead, they confined their scholarly activism to improving existing democracy. What logically flowed from these priorities and assumptions was a strong belief that historians ought to write books in service of democracy, books that addressed critical issues, offered insightful analysis, yet were still accessible to a broad audience. In other words, they ought to write the type of books that LaFeber did, as exemplified by his work on Central America.

The “Progressive legacy” was apparent in LaFeber’s work in another way. As critical as he could be of US foreign policy, LaFeber had zero interest in chucking the American system of government. He made that clear in a 1985 tribute to Harrington, in which LaFeber wrote approvingly of how fellow historian Jerald Combs had characterized Harrington’s students. Borrowing from Combs, and indirectly responding to critics of neodependency theory along the way, LaFeber wrote:

While some Harrington students have been outspokenly critical of capitalist development, and have used Marxist categories to explain that development, they—unlike leading Western intellectuals who have used the same categories—have not called for change through violence. They instead believe in the system’s ability to recognize its problems, debate the alternatives, peacefully construct other and better institutions, and thus rationally carry out much needed reforms.⁶⁴

LaFeber was one of those students. He may have assigned Lenin's "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism," to his own students in the second half of his survey of US foreign relations, but LaFeber's political pole star was democratic reform, not leftist revolution.

To critics who implied otherwise, LaFeber typically responded publicly, if he responded at all, with grace and wit. In 1999, he admitted that for the past 15 years or so he usually chose not to respond to, or even read, reviews, because, whether positive or negative, they tended to be a distraction from the current project at hand.⁶⁵ An exception occurred in 1989 when the *New Republic* faulted *The American Age* for failing to mention certain themes and concepts that the reviewer argued were essential. Considering the review "so bad I had to answer," LaFeber in his response simply—but devastatingly—tallied how often he mentioned these themes and concepts according to the book's index.⁶⁶ In 1985, LaFeber responded with humor after a conservative think tank scholar lazily described him as an "American Marxist historian" in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.⁶⁷ As LaFeber pointed out, actual Marxist scholars had criticized his Central American and Cold War studies for their failure to concentrate on economic factors alone. "Perhaps I should be flattered. By describing my writings as Marxist, Mr. [Mark] Falcoff does ascribe a consistency and coherence to them that are, unfortunately, not there," LaFeber teased.⁶⁸ Privately, LaFeber explained that he had responded in part because he knew that the *Journal* was indexed, thereby ensuring that his was the last word.⁶⁹ LaFeber took an even softer approach toward fellow Wisconsin alum Robert Freeman Smith. In the tribute that he wrote about Harrington, LaFeber obliquely acknowledged, but did not bother to dismantle, Smith's criticism of *Inevitable Revolutions*. To disabuse the idea that Wisconsin graduate students were a left-leaning monolith, LaFeber wrote, one only had to look at the reviews that Smith recently had started writing about other members of the so-called "Wisconsin School."⁷⁰

Although he never bothered to respond to Arthur Schlesinger's damning assessment of *Inevitable Revolutions*, LaFeber did reveal much about his priorities as a scholar-activist in an exchange about the review with a former student:

"I think Schlesinger probably killed the book in Washington. He really wrote a savage and from my view unfair review. Arthur has always worked over people from Wisconsin whom he suspects of "revisionism"—whatever that is. No doubt he also did not like my fundamental criticism of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, on which the entire book turns—especially since Arthur was working on the Alliance in the White House. But he never mentions that in the review. Interesting thing is that the Associate Editor of the POST wrote a letter of apology to me for the review—but published it anyway. The book is selling well in New York City, Boston, and other places, but clearly not having much effect on the crazy people in the Reagan Administration.⁷¹

Clearly blunter in his private correspondence than in his public pronouncements, LaFeber in public held to a standard of polite discourse that encouraged reasonable debate, a position consistent with his high opinion of democracy's capacity for improvement. Therefore, he deeply regretted that Schlesinger's review may have kept his work from reaching its main target: Reagan administration policymakers.

In *Inevitable Revolutions*, he noted with concern the damage this same group was also doing at home. When lecturing, LaFeber often spoke with admiration of "small 'd' democrats," that is, Americans who valued democratic government and recognized its fragility. Not many

were to be found in the Reagan White House, he feared. Although unlikely to join a protest himself, LaFeber reserved some of his most scathing comments for the damage done by that administration to individual liberties during the late 1980s. He detailed the illegal spying and harassment endured by those who opposed official US policy, such as the members of CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.⁷² His summation of the damage wrought by the Iran-Contra affair in which US agents sold arms to Iran to fund the contras was scorching:

The Iran-Contra scandal posed a dangerous threat to the United States. Unelected and unaccountable military officers in the N.S.C. [National Security Council] worked with key State Department personnel to defy US laws. They did so for the sole reason that they thought their case was right and that all opposition, even from Congress and [Secretary of State George] Schulz, was wrong. They dragged the Constitution, US policies in Central America, [and] Americans' reputation and credibility around the world through the mud.

These unelected zealots abandoned the rule of law, LaFeber continued, for a policy that was doomed to fail.⁷³ As LaFeber showed in the second edition of *Inevitable Revolutions*, US attempts to isolate and undermine the Sandinista government succeeded only in pushing it further to the left. Once again, US policy had reaped the opposite of what it attempted to sow.

As he revisited that point, LaFeber made clear the extent to which historical scholarship was his chosen mode of activism. His career was devoted to unmasking and analyzing the hard “realities of power” as manifested by the United States across the globe.⁷⁴ Thus, just as LaFeber

considered the transition of the United States from a nation that inspired revolution to one that opposed it as “one of the central questions in US diplomatic history,” he viewed the rapid transformation of the United States from a collection of former colonies to a global superpower in less than two centuries as a crucial topic of inquiry, arguably the most crucial, in US history overall.⁷⁵ Endlessly pursuing this line of scholarly inquiry, LaFeber maintained a sharp focus on power in all his books.

When combined with his extraordinary writing skills and painstaking research, this unrelenting focus helps explain LaFeber’s remarkable ability to pivot from topic to topic in his books. Not by chance did LaFeber’s work on Central America showcase themes that appeared in his other works, including the close connection between domestic welfare and foreign policy, the US penchant for unilateralism, the nation’s constant hunt for economic opportunity, and, consequently, an inability to blame Cold War tensions solely on Soviet aggression. Another common theme particularly relevant to Central America, and indicative of LaFeber’s views of democracy, was his questioning of the on again/off again habit among US policymakers of championing self-determination and democracy in the form of holding elections. Elections simply could not bear the weight of upholding democracy, he wrote, in the absence of “independent and fair judiciary systems, consensus on political and secular norms, responsible governing institutions that can check as well as extend power, and a functioning economy providing the needs of life.”⁷⁶ Notably, in Central America, most of these pieces were missing. But they were missing in other parts of the world, too.

LaFeber’s unshakeable conviction that the rise of American power across the globe was an essential topic in US history also shaped his measured response to the constant criticism directed at the field over the course of his career. Chief among them was that the field of US

diplomatic history, to use an old-fashioned term, was too focused on white men and too US-centric. Consequently, critics labeled US diplomatic history hopelessly out-of-date, irrelevant, and worst of all, boring.⁷⁷ Although he did not buy the criticism, LaFeber saw room for some improvement. As he once pointed out in seminar, US presidents and secretaries of state were, at least until recently, all white men, a circumstance that skewed the field away from easy incorporation of the dominant themes of race, class and gender that had captivated US historians in the wake of 1960s social movements.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, LaFeber showcased racism as a function of US power in his work on Central America, as part of his endeavor to “move beyond the usual diplomatic history—that is, what we said to them, they to us, and we to ourselves.”⁷⁹

Recognizing gender as a category of analysis took LaFeber more time. Initially resistant to including women and family history within a US history textbook that he co-wrote, LaFeber and his co-author “finally caved in” on that point, deciding to add a third author to do what they literally considered women’s work.⁸⁰ In 1998, however, LaFeber contributed a blurb to Kristin L. Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood*, a gendered look at 1890s expansionism, in which he praised her “pioneering, imaginative and provocative analysis.” The book could not be ignored, he explained, “in part because of the spirited debate about its innovative approach.”⁸¹

Nonetheless, to LaFeber, the tragedy of 9/11 settled the debate about what were relevant research priorities and approaches within the field of the history of US foreign relations. Indeed, in the aftermath of that tragedy, LaFeber detected with satisfaction a renewed interest in what some considered old-fashioned diplomatic history. “All those jazzy cross-cultural, ethnic, gender descriptions seem to have given way to more traditional categories since 9/11,” LaFeber noted in 2002. He had a theory as to why: “Those traditional ways of studying the field have rebounded, not least in my view, because the less traditionally trained scholars have done a lousy job of

trying to explain what happened on 9/11.”⁸² Not surprisingly, both before 9/11 and afterward, LaFeber demonstrated little patience with any approach that decentered the United States as a hegemonic power. “A major problem with transnational history or, as many job descriptions now call a variation, international history, is that, in the effort to be inclusive, the realities of power are too often avoided,” he insisted in a 2007 *Diplomatic History* article. Not all players on the international stage were created equal, he insisted. As for cultural studies of “soft power,” they might be fun to read but lacked analytical heft. If a traditional field, at least the history of US foreign relations was one directed at understanding important matters. By default, the fields that LaFeber labeled “minor” were not. “Some day scholars will look back at this era and wonder why so many researchers and teachers were pushing minor (if different) perspectives when the guts of the issue, American foreign policies in key countries, were failing—and too few in the United States either cared or analyzed the problem,” he wrote to a friend in 2010, seven years into the Iraq War.⁸³

Ironically, for a student of power as it operated among nations, LaFeber cultivated a narrow view of it elsewhere. As much attention as he paid to the prevalence of racism in the history of US foreign relations, LaFeber never was captivated by the notion of structural racism despite its growing popularity among his academic peers. Nor did patriarchy ever truly interest him. To be sure, LaFeber deplored injustice at a personal level. That five of his last six PhD students were women was more than a coincidence. When he himself was a graduate student, he was surprised by the pervasiveness of segregation in Washington DC.⁸⁴ Yet, in a well-visited episode, he strongly condemned the forcible occupation of Willard Straight Hall, Cornell’s Student Union, in April 1969 by African American students outraged by a cross-burning and other incidents on campus. After white fraternity members attempted to evict them, the students

smuggled in guns.⁸⁵ LaFeber was appalled at the time by the takeover and angered by the Cornell administration's promise of no reprisals for those involved. Long afterward, he continued to insist that the armed display of Black power in 1969 was "essentially raping the major principle of the university," namely the free and peaceful interchange of ideas.⁸⁶

LaFeber likewise opposed the Latinx gun-free four-day sit-in at Cornell's Day Hall in November 1993. Angry over a vandalized art exhibition on campus, students, who were already frustrated about the lack of progress in hiring "Hispanic" faculty and staff, entered the building and refused to leave.⁸⁷ While Professor Tom Holloway, the history department's Latin Americanist, considered the demonstration "a semi-spontaneous act . . . of civil disobedience," in the style of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez, LaFeber's reaction was less sanguine. According to Holloway, LaFeber looked as close to angry as Holloway ever recalled seeing him in 25 years of being colleagues: "I think Walt saw the Latino students' actions in 1993 through the lens of 1969 and he didn't like what he saw one bit."⁸⁸ Notably, despite his disapproval, LaFeber also modeled the behavior that he preferred by writing directly to the student leader of the Day Hall protest, a history major whom he had taught. The note outlined his disagreement with the protest, according to that leader, "but not in a way that ruptured our relationship."⁸⁹

Ultimately, LaFeber's idealized view of the university as a place that shed light, not heat, as a hallowed ground for reasoned debate, directly paralleled his appreciation of democracy as, in its best incarnation, a forum to advance reform. Unfortunately, however, neither optimistic perspective had much to do with the founding of Ethnic Studies programs across the United States. Again and again, universities have been convinced to found Ethnic Studies and other similar programs not because of rational arguments but almost always in the wake of student

takeovers, hunger strikes, and other forceful demands.⁹⁰ A proud Cornellian, LaFeber failed to recognize that power infused the institution that he loved.

Still, we can all be grateful that LaFeber's commitment to understanding, teaching, and writing about the history of US foreign relations was unwavering. He, too, was a small "d" democrat whose Central American endeavors were written to sway the course of US foreign policy in an area of the world that most Americans knew little about. Determined to change that, in *Inevitable Revolutions* he advanced the proposition that the isthmus was the most important area in the world to the United States based on its geographic proximity, deep historical ties, and Reagan-era fearmongering. Although that claim might be disputed from the perspective of the 2020s versus the 1980s, few could dispute that LaFeber elevated the region's importance to academics, policymakers, and the reading public by weighing in on the topic of US-Central American relations in a time of crisis. Today the term "neodependency" has found more of a home among theorists interested in the fate of poorer across the globe than among historians of US foreign relations.⁹¹ Nevertheless, by introducing neodependency into the lexicon of diplomatic history, LaFeber cleverly positioned himself as both an ardent critic of US actions and—distinct from Marxists of either the academic or guerilla variety—a strong opponent of revolutionary violence.⁹² Arguably, his careful analysis set the terms of debates for the hundreds of publications on this topic that followed in his wake during the 1990s and beyond.⁹³

Moreover, LaFeber set the stage for understanding "blowback" in the Central American case, meaning the unintended consequences of American actions abroad. Coined in the 1950s by the CIA, the term was popularized by Chalmers Johnson, a political scientist who in 2000 published a book with that title and theme.⁹⁴ Since 1993, crises in Central America have continued and often have been entangled with US foreign policy. Not by coincidence did

immigration from Central America remain paltry until the 1980s when people started fleeing massive political violence and economic chaos. Many of these new arrivals moved to urban areas, where, as the new Latinos on the block, some young people joined gangs to survive. Meanwhile the United States made it easier to deport immigrants who were arrested or convicted of crimes even if they were in the country legally. That tougher policy ensured the exportation of an American-grown criminal element to poor and politically unstable nations. One result was that a gang like MS-13 became an international criminal organization. Another was more suffering for the people of El Salvador who in 2022 were caught between gang-related criminal violence and, under the rubric of a national anti-gang campaign, brutal government-backed human rights violations.⁹⁵ In 2021, more Central Americans than Mexicans congregated along the US-Mexico border hoping to cross.⁹⁶ What might LaFeber have said about this chain of events? We miss his wisdom.

We also miss his courage and his general demeanor of polite unflappability. As often as LaFeber's career and publications earned extraordinary praise, he was also targeted for sharp, often unfair, criticism for daring to take a hard, analytical look at the course of US foreign policy. One attempt at a "gotcha" moment was particularly telling. A scholar reviewing eight foreign policy courses for bias (the proposition itself indicative of the writer's own conservative leanings) slammed LaFeber for describing the war in Vietnam as "the most pointless, costly, and bloody war in our nation's history." Casualty rates in the Civil War and both World Wars exceeded the number of dead in Vietnam, the review pointed out. That is true, but only if one looks just at American combat deaths and ignores the estimated three million Vietnamese who died in the war.⁹⁷ Not inclined to describe the other wars as "pointless," LaFeber also did not ignore the Vietnamese when writing that sentence. He studied the impact of US foreign relations

at home and abroad, upon Americans and non-Americans. He did so, moreover, by maintaining the highest historical standards. Even this seeker of bias had to admit that he detected, in *Inevitable Revolutions* no less, “a genuine professional scruple . . . on LaFeber’s part to respect the facts.”⁹⁸ Similarly, the scolding Schlesinger conceded that, “*Inevitable Revolutions* deserves to be read by everyone concerned with saving the United States from further folly in Central America.”⁹⁹ By marrying the highest standards of scholarly excellence along with an unwavering commitment to make a difference across decades, Walter LaFeber epitomized the best type of scholar-activist---even though he most likely would have objected to the description!

Endnotes

¹ Walter LaFeber, “Inevitable Revolutions: US policies in Central America have encouraged what they were supposed to prevent,” *The Atlantic* 6 (June 1982): 74-83. The authors would like to thank David Langbart, Stephen Streeter, Rachel Jean-Baptiste, Lisa G. Materson, Andrew S. Higgins, and participants in a workshop that took place on the Cornell campus in October 2022 for their contributions to this article.

² LaFeber, “Inevitable Revolutions,” 83.

³ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 16-18.

⁴ Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford Press, 1978).

⁵ Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, Updated Edition (New York: Oxford Press, 1989).

⁶ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2nd ed., Revised and Expanded (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

⁷ LaFeber, “Inevitable Revolutions,” *The Atlantic*, 83.

⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 341. Unless indicated otherwise, quotes are from the 1983 edition.

⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 341.

¹⁰ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 8-12.

¹¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 13.

¹² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 31.

¹³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 13.

¹⁴ Omar Sánchez, “The Rise and Fall of Dependency Theory: Does it Inform Underdevelopment Today?” *EIAL (Estudios Interdisciplinarios América Latina)* 14 (2003): 13. Probably the most-cited book on dependency theory in Latin America is Fernando H. Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). For excellent overviews of dependency theory, see Louis A. Pérez, “Dependency” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed., eds. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 162-175; and Robert Pakenham’s thoughtful *The Dependency Movement—Scholarship and Politics in Development Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal* (1989), x-xi. Unless indicated otherwise, quotes are from the 1989 edition.

¹⁶ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 30, 33, 56.

¹⁷ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 36, 58, 60-62.

¹⁸ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 52-53.

¹⁹ For an initial articulation in English, see Theotonio Dos Santos, “The Structure of Dependence,” *American Economic Review* 60 (1970): 231-236.

²⁰ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 53.

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- ²¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 18.
- ²² LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 53.
- ²³ W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).
- ²⁴ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 53.
- ²⁵ Sánchez, “The Rise and Fall of Dependency Theory,” 32.
- ²⁶ Robert Freeman Smith, “The United States and the Caribbean-Central American Region: Empire, System, or Legitimate Sphere of Influence?” *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1994): 445.
- ²⁷ Schlesinger’s exact job title was found in the guide to his personal papers deposited at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/AMSPSP_Papers.
- ²⁸ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The US and Central America: A No-Win Game,” *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1983.
- ²⁹ Walter LaFeber, “Fred Harvey Harrington,” *Diplomatic History* 9 (Fall 1985): 312.
- ³⁰ Lloyd C. Gardner and Thomas J. McCormick, “The Making of a Wisconsin Revisionist,” *Diplomatic History* 28 (November 2004): 612-624, reprinted as chapter 2 in this volume. Lorena Oropeza remembered that he made the comment about revisionists in a graduate seminar.
- ³¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 16.
- ³² James Mahoney and Diana Rodríguez-Franco, “Dependency Theory,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development*, ed. Carol Lancaster and Nicolas van de Walle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24. Like Sánchez, these authors note that many *dependentistas* likewise reject the labeling of their ideas as a fixed theory.
- ³³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 22.
- ³⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 23, 29.
- ³⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 79.
- ³⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 37.
- ³⁷ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 49-54.
- ³⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 67-74.
- ³⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 81. LaFeber noted that US economic interests and State Department interests usually converged but not always, in which case protecting the system was what mattered. From *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), “[I]n nearly every instance, the interests of the State Department and North American business coincided. When they did not, the business interest usually gave way, as indeed it had to if a *system* was to be maintained.” Emphasis in the original.
- ⁴⁰ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 95.
- ⁴¹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 78.
- ⁴² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 116-117.

⁴³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 124.

⁴⁴ For the shift of US military policy toward Latin America from hemispheric defense to Latin American internal security, see David M. K. Sheinin, *Argentina and the United States – An Alliance Contained* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 123.

⁴⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 124. “Pecked at” in the sense that the land law had modest aims and included compensation for landowners. Any attempt to redistribute wealth, however, threatened not only US influence in Central America but also power relations throughout the hemisphere.

⁴⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 104, 109. The School of the Americans moved to Ft. Benning, Ga in 1984 and was closed in 2000.

⁴⁷ He was not alone in this criticism. See Peter Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*, 3rd ed., (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008) 146-147.

⁴⁸ LaFeber’s wording also slyly referred to Jimmy Carter labeling the 1970s energy crisis “the moral equivalent of war” in a 1977 speech. The phrase originally came from the philosopher William James.

⁴⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 212.

⁵⁰ Essentially, the critics argued that highlighting the relationship *between* nation-states ignored the range of processes within states. For a summary of this critique, see Claudio Katz (translated by Stanley Manilowitz) *Dependency Theory After Fifty Years: The Continuing Relevance of Latin American Thought* (Boston: Brill, 2022) 76-77.

⁵¹ See reviews by William M. LeoGrande in *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (Spring 1986): 152-154, and Mark L. Kleinman, *UCLA Historical Journal* 5 (1984): 133-134. Schlesinger made a similar point in his review. Before the second edition of *Inevitable Revolutions* was published, LaFeber revealed his impatience with this type of criticism. In a letter to Jim Siekmeier, he commented about a book that grouped him among historians who in analyzing US support for the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua had underestimated its “dark political brilliance” and ability to defy democracy-minded Americans. With a dollop of irony given how often the label had been applied to him, LaFeber wrote, “Sometimes I can’t stand revisionists.” The quotation about brilliance can be found on page xviii in Paul Coe Clark, Jr., *The United States and Somoza: A Revisionist Look, 1933-1936* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992).

⁵² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 232.

⁵³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 213-218.

⁵⁴ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 340-344.

⁵⁵ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 66.

⁵⁶ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 37.

⁵⁷ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 52.

⁵⁸ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 323.

⁵⁹ Walter LaFeber, “Eyewitness to Terror,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 1984, [accessed September 30, 2022, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1984/04/08/eyewitness-to-terror/43a71bfc-2370-4524-a93c-8d5b9ffdd1a0/>]; Tom Buckley, *Violent Neighbors: El Salvador, Central America, and the United States* (NY: Times Books, 1984).

⁶⁰ LaFeber made this point about relative threats in an article for a Cornell campus publication, “Carl Becker’s Histories and the American Present,” *Ezra Magazine* 4 (Fall 2011): 8-9, <https://ezramagazine.cornell.edu/FALL11/Viewpoint1.html>.

⁶¹ For Guatemala, see Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) and Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of American Coup in Guatemala* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982). Rigoberta Menchu’s, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, published in English in 1984 (New York: Verso) had appeared in Spanish the year before. See Menchú with Elizabeth Burgos, *Yo me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Havana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1983).

⁶² Dana G. Munro, *Intervention and Dollar Diplomacy in the Caribbean, 1900-1921* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) and *The United States and the Caribbean Republics, 1921-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

⁶³ Jeff Sharlet, “Why Diplomatic Historians May Be the Victims of American Triumphalism,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 24, 1999, A19.

⁶⁴ LaFeber, “Fred Harvey Harrington,” 318. For an interesting comparison of LaFeber’s political position in comparison to that of Gabriel Kolko, whose politics and scholarship were more overtly leftist, see “Functions of Revisionist Historiography during the Reagan Era,” *Left History* 15 (Fall/Winter 2010-2011): 65-86.

⁶⁵ Walter LaFeber letter to Douglas Little, August 25, 1999.

⁶⁶ See David Hendrickson “Trivial Pursuits: *The American Age: US Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, since 1750*” *The New Republic*, May 1, 1989, and Walter LaFeber, “History Lessons,” *New Republic*, June 19, 1989. LaFeber explained his decision to respond in a May 15, 1989, letter to David Langbart, a former student who shared some correspondence with the contributors to this volume.

⁶⁷ Mark Falcoff, “Bookshelf: A Will to Power: The Making of a Sandinista,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 1985. Falcoff reviewed Omar Cabezas’ *Fire from the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista* (New York: Crown, 1985), which included an afterword by LaFeber.

⁶⁸ Walter LaFeber, “Marxist Label Won’t Stick,” Letters to the Editor, *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 1985.

⁶⁹ LaFeber letter to Douglas Little, February 28, 1986.

⁷⁰ LaFeber, “Fred Harvey Harrington,” 313.

⁷¹ LaFeber to Langbart, November 13, 1983.

⁷² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 295-296.

⁷³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 338, 334.

⁷⁴ Walter LaFeber, “Some Perspectives in US Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 31 (June 2007): 424.

⁷⁵ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 115.

⁷⁶ LaFeber, “Some Perspectives,” 426. LaFeber credited Fareed Zakaria’s concept of “illiberal democracy” for informing his thinking on this point. See Walter LaFeber, “The Tension between Democracy and Capitalism During the American Century,” *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 263.

⁷⁷ Walter LaFeber, “Response to Charles S. Maier, ‘Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations,’” *Diplomatic History* 5 (Fall 1981): 362-364.

⁷⁸ Among his students, Brenda Gayle Plummer has brilliantly captured the explanatory power of race and racism in her books, including *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷⁹ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 341.

⁸⁰ LaFeber to Langbart, April 14, 1986. The textbook, initially co-authored with Richard Polenberg, was called *The American Century* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1975). Later editions featured Nancy Woloch as a co-author. Jim Siekmeier remembered in the late 1980s looking through LaFeber’s books in McGraw Hall Room 425, his office for many years, and finding a book by Mary Beth Norton, a Cornell colleague, who taught women’s history at Cornell. The inscription read: “Walt - More Consciousness-raising – Best, Mary Beth.”

⁸¹ Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). The blurb is from the back cover.

⁸² LaFeber to Langbart, November 2, 2002.

⁸³ LaFeber to Langbart, July 21, 2010.

⁸⁴ LaFeber to Langbart, September 15, 2013.

⁸⁵ Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 178-179, 181.

⁸⁶ Downs, 18. From the perspective of 2023, LaFeber’s use of gendered language also stands out.

⁸⁷ For details about the art exhibition vandalism, see Sascha Hernández, “Recalling the '93 Day Hall takeover by Latino students,” *Cornell Chronicle*, October 30, 2014, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2014/10/recalling-93-day-hall-takeover-latino-students>. Also see Glenn C. Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick, *Cornell: A History, 1940-2015* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 308-315.

⁸⁸ Email from Thomas H. Holloway to the authors, January 23, 2023. In another email exchange, Professor Tim Borstelmann, another member of the Cornell History Department at the time, also remembered that Walt LaFeber “was upset.” Email from Tim Borstelmann to Lorena Oropeza, February 4, 2023.

⁸⁹ Email from Eduardo Peñalver to Lorena Oropeza, February 5, 2023. Peñalver returned to Cornell as a law professor in 2006 and became dean of the law school in 2014. In 2023, he was the president of Seattle University.

⁹⁰ In California, for example, Third World student strikes at San Francisco State and the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1960s launched Ethnic Studies. See Andrew S. Higgins, *Higher Education for All: Racial Inequality, Cold War Liberalism, and the California Master Plan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023). LaFeber had a point about the consequences: Higgins’ traced Reagan’s ride to the California governorship to his opposition to these strikes.

⁹¹ A recent example: Adrián Sotelo Valencia, “Neo-Imperialism and Neo-Dependency: Two Sides of the Same Historical-Political Process,” *Sub-Imperialism Revisited: Dependency Theory in the Thought of Ruy Mauro Marini*, ed. in Sotelo Valencia, ed. (Netherlands: Brill, 2017).

⁹² His ability to thread that particular needle may have prompted LaFeber’s mention in 1985 in a CIA-generated list of potential speakers who would offer agents-in-training an “alternative or revisionist view” regarding the administration’s policies toward Central America. Memo, Director of Training and Education to Chief, Intelligence

Training, January 16, 1985, CIA-RDP90-00998R000100010019, CIA FOIA Online Reading Room <www.cia.gov/reading room>. There is no indication that an invitation was ever issued or accepted.

⁹³ LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* (1993), 413.

⁹⁴ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Cost and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000). Coined by the CIA, the term itself dates to the 1950s.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Blitzer, “The Rise of Nayib Bukele, El Salvador’s Authoritarian President,” *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2022.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/12/the-rise-of-nayib-bukele-el-salvadors-authoritarian-president>.

⁹⁶ John Gramlich and Alissa Scheller, “What is happening along the US-Mexico Border in Seven Charts,” November, 9, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/11/09/whats-happening-at-the-u-s-mexico-border-in-7-charts/>. Arguably another “blowback” phenomenon is climate change which is also triggering migration. See Maria Christina García, *State of Disaster: The Failure of US Immigration Policy in an Age of Climate Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

⁹⁷ André Ryerson, “The Question of Bias: How Eight College Courses Teach American Foreign Policy,” *Academic Questions* 1 (1988), 14.

⁹⁸ Ryerson, “The Question of Bias,” 7-8.

⁹⁹ Schlesinger, “The US and Central America: A No-Win Game.”