

Chapter Eight

Demystifying Globalization and US Power Michael Jordan and Global Capitalism

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Walter LaFeber loved sports. He played varsity basketball in high school and in his first year at Hanover College, until he decided that scholarship needed to take priority. When recruited to the Cornell faculty, he made the mistake of thinking that the status of Cornell's football team as the best in the Ivy League meant that the team actually played well. The poor quality of Cornell football did not prevent him from crowing over the team's victories, however, as his old friend Lloyd Gardner can attest. He reveled in baseball most of all, especially his beloved Chicago Cubs. Sandy LaFeber recalls that on the first morning on her very first visit to Walkerton, Indiana, LaFeber's hometown, Walt roused her out of bed early, because he had tickets to an afternoon Cubs game, and they needed to catch the train to Chicago. Gardner and Richard Immerman also recall an infamous outing to a Cubs-Reds game during a meeting of the Organization of American Historians in the early 1980s. Cold, rainy weather at a time when the two teams were absolutely abysmal did not deter LaFeber, which speaks volumes about his die-hard loyalty to the Cubs, not to mention his preference to avoid academic conferences. His daughter Suzanne fondly recalls a father-daughter trip to a playoff game at Wrigley Field in 2015, where after the game her father came away with a baseball signed by Billy Williams, a favorite former player from

LaFeber preferred college basketball and football to their professional counterparts, however, so his 1999 book, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, did not represent an exercise in self-indulgent fandom. Rather, Jordan's iconic global stature, combined with Nike's ability to sell sneakers and sports imagery all over the world, grabbed his scholarly attention.² In the same year that the Michael Jordan book came out, LaFeber also delivered his presidential address to the Society for the History of American Foreign Relations on "Technology and American Foreign Relations." Together, both works provided occasions to grapple with the evolution of global capitalism, the mobilization of knowledge, culture, mediated imaginaries, and their implications for US power.

Of course, such issues had always featured prominently in LaFeber's work. Already in *The New Empire*, for example, culture and ideational spheres provided a driving force of US foreign relations with the "intellectual formation" of economic and racial anxieties that gave rise to the new American empire of the late 19th century. But by the 1990s, Emily Rosenberg's path-breaking work on business, popular culture, and US global relations,³ combined with histories of science and technology increasingly attentive to the social, political, and institutional dimensions of knowledge production and dissemination, provided more robust foundations for LaFeber's ever-fertile historical imagination. In an immediate post-Cold War era that seemed to guarantee US hegemony for the foreseeable future, LaFeber focused more intently on how soft power, in the form of mass consumerism, mass communications, scientific knowledge, and technological systems, constituted the key means for the United States to amass and deploy global political capital. In his 1999 SHAFR address, secretaries of state William H. Seward, Elihu Root, and George P. Shultz emerged as movers, shakers, and visionaries who understood and exploited modern technology as means of power, whereas in the Michael Jordan book, "His Airness"

provided a vehicle for interrogating the blend of corporate power, mass media, mass consumerism, and the cult of celebrity that undergirded US cultural hegemony in the 1990s. In both accounts, knowledge and culture, by being embedded within and mobilized by well-organized and powerful corporate and political institutions, defined and perpetuated US power well beyond what the more limited accouterments of formal diplomacy and military dominance could offer.

These works on global capitalism, culture, and corporate power strongly reflected their early post-cold war moment, in which LaFeber described the historical past as a gradual unfolding of accumulated US power that ultimately consolidated American hegemony. By contrast, the present-day era of a hollowed-out middle class, an increasingly unstable and polarized US political system, a complex multipolar global order, and the almost apocalyptic upheaval of warfare, climate change, and a global pandemic allows no such confidence about the durability of US power, or even American nationhood itself. Where does LaFeber's analysis of technological change, corporate power, mass media, and the globalization of sports fit within a radically changed present-day context? In this essay, we offer an appreciation of LaFeber's late 1990s writings about capitalism, while also suggesting the ways in which the so-called cultural and international turns in historical scholarship, as well as the dramatically reduced circumstances of the United States itself two decades later, challenge LaFeber's findings. In particular, global and transnational approaches now emphasize the need for a more dramatic decentering of US power and recognition of a more fluid set of processes and diffuse centers of gravity at work, defined by the co-creation of US and global orders through the reciprocal give-and-take of exchange.

LaFeber himself had reservations about the international turn in the history of US foreign

ignore as exogenous the massive physical mobilization and cycling of energy and materials that the present-day global economy requires.⁵

In the midst of these developments, Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014) and a self-proclaimed movement for a "new history of American capitalism" revived interest in the history of American economic life and made the history of capitalism into a flourishing area of research. Exponents of the new history of American capitalism acknowledged that their research program rested upon ample precedents. As Beckert and Christine Desan observed in a 2018 essay, "disciplinary trends in history, economics, political science, and law," particularly earlier scholarship in economic history, the revelations of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, the movement launched in the late 1970s to bring the state back into historical analysis, and more recent investigations of political economy, had all paved the way for a reinvigorated history of capitalism. Surprisingly, however, despite an emphasis on the global as one of the hallmarks of the new literature, Beckert and Desan omitted US foreign relations from their overview.⁶ Seth Rockman, in an earlier overview, also identified multiple historiographic lineages as candidates for the field's progenitors. In a long list that included New Left labor history, the scholarship on American political development in the 1980s and 1990s, and William Cronon's stunning meld of economic and environmental history in *Nature's Metropolis*, the Wisconsin School once again went without mention.⁷

Such lacunae did not pass unnoticed. In a lively roundtable in the *Journal of American History*, Peter James Hudson identified internationalism as critical analytical terrain and took historians of American capitalism to task for their blinkered and truncated vision. "Despite the recent turns to diaspora, empire, and transnationalism," he observed, "U.S. history remains provincial."⁸ Writing in another forum, Paul A. Kramer similarly welcomed the promise of the

field's breadth and ambition, although he expressed skepticism about "the hype" in which "the 'new history of capitalism' label proved an effective brand." In an incisive, rigorous, and theoretically informed analysis, Kramer went on to highlight the legacy of the Wisconsin school

of its own. But other topics—the economic developmental aspirations of the United States from the American revolution onward, the economic, strategic, and ideological formulations of US leaders and intellectuals in the late 19th century, American overconfidence in the virtues of liberal order, and the counterproductive nature of American antipathy towards other countries' revolutionary political movements in the 20th century—built upon Williams' ideas to become classic themes in LaFeber's own writings throughout his career. LaFeber also reached beyond political economy to incorporate questions of culture, race, gender, and knowledge-making into his understanding of US foreign policy. All of these themes came together in his efforts in the late 1990s to reckon with what capitalism had become and how it had gotten there.

in the next generation, LaFeber's beloved John Quincy Adams—firmly believed in a glorious future for their country, even as the realities of US weakness relative to European powers required a more modest and tenuous strategy of attempting to navigate a predatory geopolitical order as a neutral trading state. In the 1840s, when then senator and future Secretary of State William H. Seward maneuvered to create a legal and political environment that could maximize the capacities of steam power and rapid communications by wire to support US imperial prospects, he tapped into this already well-established exceptionalist tradition at the heart of American nationhood.¹⁵

Seward, Root, and Shultz, as embodiments of technologically-savvy foresight and nationalist ambition, provided LaFeber with a framing device to analyze what he defined as three distinct periods of economic and political development in the United States: the first and second industrial revolutions, followed by the information revolution of the late 20th century. Seward recognized early on the transformative possibilities opened by steam power and telegraphy. As he moved in his career from the governorship of New York to the US Senate, he mobilized law and political capital to support railways, telegraphy, and other new technologies as drivers of American commercial expansion and enhanced global political status. Like many of his contemporaries, when he contemplated steam-powered ships, he foresaw an ever-burgeoning trade across the Pacific. As secretary of state, Seward also aggressively pursued American dominance in telegraphy, albeit with mixed success. Although Seward did not live to see the age of US technological dominance

possibilities, but with the transition from the first to the second industrial revolution came a new era of US power.¹⁶

For LaFeber, Elihu Root personified the late 19th and early 20th century world of the second industrial revolution, in which the age of electricity and the combustion engine amplified to dizzying new heights the scope and scale of globalized commerce and labor migration. According to LaFeber's rendering, Root, who served Theodore Roosevelt as both secretary of war and state among his many notable positions, understood that ever more powerful technologies of communications, industrial production, and warfare, made possible by increasingly purposive efforts to tie scientific research to direct commercial and industrial applications, required the vigorous deployment of governmental authority. Only the federal government could assemble the organizational might to advance national agendas through control of strategic waterways, communications, and access to global markets for American trade and finance. Root and his contemporaries felt keenly the vertiginous pace of the 20th century's global entanglements, which embedded the United States within an intricate web of connections that signaled both opportunity and danger. A technological age of modern capitalism promised

structures, blended technological innovation, marketing, and nimble, spatially defused modes of cross-border operation, particularly the exploitation of cheap and well-regimented labor available in Asian factories. As globalization reshaped the geography of manufacturing, it also created new markets and consumerist fantasies. With satellite television, American media corporations developed global audiences and made the NBA into the stuff of excitement, desire, and sociability worldwide.²¹ In this dizzying, technologically-driven opening of economic possibility, Mn2 (bi)3 (ol9od(n)5 (d's)-1 (d)5 ()-2 (ng, t(a)-1 (r4-1 (ogr)-2 (e)-1 (ha)-1 ow-25.910 TTd[(bo)-0.

poverty, Nike's and Jordan's signature advertising slogan, "Just Do It," rang of empty promise for young people who had to make their way in a post-industrial US economy. Meanwhile, as Nike navigated the era of Title IX by creating sneaker lines for American women, female workers on production lines in Asia suffered from low wages, gendered labor exploitation, and worse.²²

LaFeber was not the first writer to cover these intertwined developments, but as a historian of US foreign relations, he tied the dynamics of late 20th century capitalism, new technologies, and sports-based consumerism to American globalism in the form of soft power and US cultural hegemony. As commodities, NBA basketball, Nike sneakers, and Jordan's image of transcendent athletic prowess added up not merely to a multi-billion dollar industry. Combined they captivated foreign consumers across global ideological fault lines with American popular culture's universalist messages of energy, innovation, and abundance. Jazz and Hollywood films in the 1920s, or the "Coca-colonization" of the Cold War had already long served US interests, but "the power of that popular culture," LaFeber contended, "multiplied with the technological marvels" that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. The globalized power of media, combined with ever-more sophisticated marketing and advertising techniques, shaped "the language, eating habits, clothes and television watching of peoples around the earth."²³ But even as critics in the 1980s and 1990s, like their predecessors earlier in the 20th century, indulged in endless hand-wringing about American cultural imperialism, LaFeber also identified the ease with which new communications technologies would defy centralized control and US

the hegemonic nature of power. For example, where historians of chattel slavery had once taken for granted the helplessness and powerlessness of persons subjected to involuntary servitude and systematic violence, Eugene Genovese's path-breaking study, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, lavishly described a social world rife with deliberate obfuscation and other forms of resistance. The enslaved subverted authority at every turn, whether by maintaining spiritual traditions, celebrating the virtues of the trickster, denying remunerative labor to slaveholders, attempting escape, or otherwise contesting the totalizing aspirations of a brutal institution.²⁵ A decade later, James C. Scott's influential *Weapons of the Weak* similarly emphasized peasants' challenge to the self-proclaimed logics of markets and modern state power not just through formal political organization, but everyday acts of resistance.²⁶ Such writings made it increasingly difficult to insist on either the top-down power of the state or the overweening influence of a global superpower within the international system, when resistance, creative adaptation, and the resilience of local folkways shaped the nexus between state, society, and international relations even amid massive asymmetries of power.

By the 1990s, right around the time that LaFeber was tackling Michael Jordan and global capitalism, other scholars increasingly appealed to cultural encounter and cross-pollination as analytical alternatives to cultural imperialism, in which symbiotic processes of give-and-take made foreign and local parties both actants and acted upon. For example, one important intervention in the field, *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (1998), stressed the blurred boundaries, messy exchanges, and local remaking of meanings that defined the US cultural presence in Latin America, even as the United States undeniably possessed and mobilized unmatched economic, political, and military resources. The challenge, as the volume's editors put it, required recognizing "the unequal

nature of Latin America's encounter with the United States" while simultaneously offering "a history that is culturally sensitive, multivocal, and interactive."²⁷ Rumors in the Dominican Republic about worm-infested "gringo chicken," for example, suggested on the one hand the dominance of American style production methods in the Dominican poultry industry, but on the other hand, they also connoted Dominican resistance to agri-business and its globalizing, homogenizing threat to the locally raised patio chickens that betokened home, family, and Dominican identity.²⁸

By the late 1990s, anthropological studies of big-name American brands and their reception abroad also focused on how locals made their own meanings out of novel cultural experiences. The writers in James L. Watson's edited volume *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (1997) uncovered a broad range of responses to fast food burger consumption that had little to do with corporate executives' imagined marketplace or the ability of US corporate

localization than it did in LaFeber's account of American-driven market penetration and the unidirectional emanation of US cultural power. A soft power so malleable that it is endlessly transmutable and transmissible may, in the end, not be power at all.

Global histories and their decentering ethos have remade historical understandings of knowledge production as well. In his SHAFR address, LaFeber presciently accorded knowledge production a central role in his account of technology and US power, and he did so at a time when historians of science had only just begun to go beyond traditional intellectual history approaches to incorporate society, politics, and global power relations into their analyses. History of science originally imagined the field as studying the unfolding of an analytical architecture of scientific ideas according to their own internal logic of discovery, and with a premium placed on understanding the emergence of key concepts, such as Newtonian mechanics, Darwinian evolution, or Einsteinian relativity theory. The sciences of state and empire—mapping, navigation, mineral and botanical surveying, and early ethnography—did not rate highly according to traditional tastes. When LaFeber pointed to the work of Lucile Brockway and Lewis Pyenson on science, technology, and global imperialism, he was referencing important early contributions in what has become a burgeoning field in the two decades since.³⁰

Questions about expertise, scientific knowledge production, alternative ways of knowing, and their interplay with systems of power now occupy center stage within the history of science, and they are commonplace in histories of capitalism and of US foreign relations as well. Moreover, the old notion that innovations in scientific knowledge simply spread outward from metropolitan European centers in the early modern period and 19th century, or from the United States and other major powers in the 20th century, has been replaced by decentering tendencies, which emphasize the contact zones and emplaced cultural encounters in diverse parts of the

world that reshaped scientific understandings.³¹ Postcolonial analyses, for example, have stressed that the forms of modern science associated with colonial rule grew not from the introduction by self-proclaimed advanced societies of enlightened order on unruly nature and alien peoples, but out of the cultural encounters in which novel mixtures of peoples and places coalesced to generate new ideas.³² Historical studies of natural history, taxonomy, and empire have also shown how projects of classification inevitably relied upon local knowledge of species, particularly the traditional names and cultural markers attached to them, even as the creation of universalized knowledge through taxonomical practice demanded the erasure of vernacular understandings.³³ The much-vaunted internationalism of science itself, as one of us has written, arguably has less to do with an intrinsic universalism of scientific knowledge than it does with global geopolitical conditions that either facilitate or obstruct flows of knowledge.³⁴ As with culture, scientific knowledge, too, moves through intricately dispersed entanglements and cross-currents of ideas, information, and constructions of meaning.

From the standpoint of more recent scholarship, LaFeber's depiction of a new global capitalism and American consumerist fantasies emanating outwards from a US center of Jordanesque prowess and US corporate clout overlooked multiple sources of agency and myriad contestations at work. The rapidity with which the edifice of post-cold war, American-driven capitalism and consumerism has crumbled perhaps suggests that its claims of power were no more than a façade in the first place. In 2019, in response to pressure from the Chinese government and business counterparts in China, the NBA hastily disavowed the tweets of the Houston Rockets' general manager in support of protests against a Chinese crackdown on political freedoms in Hong Kong.³⁵ China's 21st-century capacity to actively shape professional basketball, and not merely buy into it, was nowhere on the horizon in LaFeber's depiction of a

Jordan-centered economic and cultural juggernaut twenty years earlier. The power to enter new markets, however, is also the power to be consumed by them.

Turning Outward and

declared, were the first and foremost of three “historical forces...bearing down upon us” that together endangered the cohesiveness of American society and a better future in the United States. “[R]acism, poverty, inequality, and injustice,” he warned, “threaten over the long-run to wound this society more deeply than the Indo-China War itself.” Notably, when LaFeber updated the essay four days later, he referenced not Kent State, but the deaths of two Black students shot by the National Guard at Jackson State College in Mississippi on May 15.⁴⁰

The inseparability of the nation’s foreign policy from its domestic political trajectory became increasingly explicit in LaFeber’s writings in the 1980s and 1990s. In response to “Marking Time,” Charles Maier’s famously critical analysis of the state of diplomatic history as a research field, LaFeber in 1981, rather than embracing Maier’s call to internationalize the study of US foreign relations, doubled down on the need to focus on the United States. He pointed first to the reality of asymmetries of power and cautioned, “What he [Maier] terms ‘international history’ ...will be misleading if all parts of the ‘system’ are considered to be roughly equal, or if the influence of that system on the United States is assumed to be as great as the American influence on the system.”⁴¹ That observation, however, was mere prologue to LaFeber’s primary concern with understanding foreign relations in order to comprehend the US political system’s prospects at home. US diplomatic historians rightly kept the United States at the center, he argued, because “[t]he United States is the only nation in the 20th century that continually exercises power globally while maintaining a liberal system at home. The parts cannot be separated, and Americans have increasingly believed that the exercise of their power overseas is necessary to keep their domestic system functioning.”⁴²

The need to reckon with the imbrication of foreign and domestic, moreover, constituted a political imperative and not a matter of mere intellectual interest. LaFeber contended that amid

an already visible decline in US power, scholars faced “an additional responsibility,” namely, the need “to examine how a liberal domestic system arose within, and became an integral part of, the global empire, and how the liberalization and individual freedoms can be protected as national power suffers a relative, inevitable decline.” This central problem, LaFeber concluded, constituted mission enough: “To trace the rise and relative decline of a three-century-old-empire, while relating its story to a unique political experiment in self-government, is a sufficient agenda for any discipline.”⁴³

This preoccupation with the meaning of empire abroad for democracy at home, which LaFeber explained so eloquently in his response to Maier, became increasingly urgent for LaFeber as the years went by. It drove his indignation and anger over American coercion and hideous violence in Central America in *Inevitable Revolutions*, and it expressed itself in more measured form in his textbook, *The American Age*, with the expansion of presidential power as

nature militated against the political consensus necessary for a nation to pursue an effective foreign policy. But technology, LaFeber speculated, offered a potential end run around the restraints of a fickle and unruly citizenry that could be goaded by the unifying forces of warfare and national security crises but easily turn impatient in the longer term. “The Raytheon Doctrine”—that is, the ability to engage in asymmetric warfare by using air power rather than risking American lives on the ground—promised to “make fighting certain wars from thirty

At one level, this tension may be innate to a settler colonial nation that aspired to be an “empire of liberty” in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, or a United States that thought it could forestall political crisis at home by pursuing empire abroad in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, only to discover that it could not have a liberal economic order without illiberal interventionism. The steadily accumulating tendency toward expanded executive authority and its resistance to oversight, especially when it came to foreign policy, further eroded democratic possibility and stymied democratic practices throughout the 20th century. Yet, the suspicion of centralized power at the heart of LaFeber’s work is also characteristic of US political culture, especially for someone who grew up with the instinctive populism of the Midwest. He cautioned that despite the seductive manifestations of US soft power courtesy of Microsoft, Nike, and Michael Jordan, and the perennial appeal of economic and military hard power, Americans could not sustain a global empire without incurring its costs, both for themselves and for others. That, in the end, is the dilemma not just of Tocqueville, but of American exceptionalism.

of modern science that ignore the 'world system' of capitalism." Shepton, review of *Science and Colonial Expansion*, in *Isis* 72 (September 1981): 495, quotation on 496. The book experienced a second life after its republication by Yale University Press in 2002, and it is now recognized as a classic work on natural history, colonialism, and state power.

⁴⁴ LaFeber, "Technology and U.S. Foreign Relations," 119. Interestingly, although LaFeber referred directly to "the Tocqueville problem" in his SHAFR address, and it constituted a throughline in his famous lectures in his survey course on US foreign relations, he did not use the phrase *The Deadly Bet*.

⁴⁵ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 164.

⁴⁶ Email, Walter LaFeber to James Siekmeier, 18 November 2007.

⁴⁷ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 183.

⁴⁸ LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, 162. For an example of another perspective, Middle East historian James L. Gelvin has suggested that *Qaeda* had more in common with anarchism than with any kind of ideology of civilizational struggle, and that anti-globalization leanings appealed "to those alienated not only from the current global economic and state systems, but from anarchist alternatives to amending those systems as well." Those sources of alienation, he contended, were not primarily about the stultifying homogenization of an Americanized global culture of consumerism, but reflected the real material deprivations of late 20th- and early 21st century globalization. On this point, he also expressed regrets about some of his own earlier