# *With a Bow to Walter LaFeber,*
# *"What Then Can We Say in Conclusion?"*

The constancy of America's Tocqueville problem described by Walter LaFeber continues to haunt the makers of US foreign policy. The chapters dedicated to him in this volume illustrate the degree to which his teaching and scholarship provided both students and readers with the essential tools needed to historicize—and thereby better understand—the present. As his tough-minded, thoughtful, and accessible scholarship consistently demonstrated, the present echoes the past even if it does not repeat it. Moreover, the past informs the present even if it does not predetermine it.

Central to LaFeber's understanding of the Tocqueville problem was the viability and sustainability of the American experiment in what has proven to be an uneasy combination of liberalism, democracy, republicanism, and of course, capitalism. Writing early in the 1800s, Tocqueville was not pessimistic about America's future, and neither was Walter LaFeber writing one-hundred-fifty years later. Both men, however, understood that reconciling the individualism and the decentralization that were foundational to the birth of the United States posed a severe challenge to fashioning and conducting successful foreign policies.

As LaFeber would repeatedly note, James Madison's Federalist No. 10 foreshadowed the degree to which effective and coherent foreign policies would be crucial to meeting the challenge of America's Tocqueville problem. By "extending the sphere," Americans could best accommodate the multiplicity of individual interests and thereby bolster a pluralistic society even as it mitigated against the tyranny of the majority and the over centralization of political, economic, and cultural power. "Extending the sphere" need not demand either continental or overseas expansion, but in America's case, it could—and did—lead to both.

The chapters of *Thinking Otherwise* fit together to produce a troubling record of America's involvement in world affairs. Wars with Britain and Mexico pushed the boundaries of the continental United States to the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. This expansion provided opportunities for the incorporation of large swaths of territory in Central and South America and Mexico to the south and Asia and the Pacific to the west into the US sphere. By the end of the 19th century, America had risen to global prominence. By the middle of the 20th, prominence had become predominance. At the dawn of the new millennium, the United States had become the liberal global order's foremost advocate and greatest beneficiary. Once America emerged as a world power, US policymakers subordinated territorial conquest to increasing trade and investment, securing access to natural resources, and cultivating acquiescent foreign leadership. They usually regarded armed intervention as a last resort, but over time they adapted to new challenges at home and abroad by developing different means to achieve their goals.

Even so, US presidents found numerous occasions to deploy force to serve what they believed, often incorrectly, to be America's global interests. The thvre5De-1 (5 (-)2 h6C r(5 (-)2 )(2 s (b)B Ol

Party refashioned in the image of Donald Trump, roam the land, threatening people of color, LGBTQ folk, immigrants, Jews and Muslims, anyone really, whom they deem insufficiently white, Christian, and conservative.

Lies and disinformation up to and including incitements to mass violence proliferate across countless media platforms as profitability and hyper-partisanship define the so-called MAGA movement to the point where honest debate over means and ends becomes impossible and historic trade-offs go not merely unresolved but also undiscussed. The massive US defense budget—larger than that of the next 10 countries combined--remains sacrosanct. Meanwhile, opioid and heroin addiction at home has destroyed entire communities, Black and white. That Americans have understandably lost faith—and patience—

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threat to American democracy more serious than any it has faced since the South started pounding Fort Sumter.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, LaFeber had a premonition that the deadly bet that George W. Bush had made with his "global war on terrorism" might eventually make Tocqueville's ghost shudder. Always attentive to the irony of American history and the tragedy of American diplomacy yet appreciative of the potential humor in the story, LaFeber was a lifelong theatergoer. Following the Taliban's defeat by US forces in late 2001, he recalled the prophetic words of one of America greatest playwrights. "Arthur Miller once reformulated the Tocqueville problem by remarking that Americans respond to a call for righteousness if they mistake it for a call to lunch," LaFeber quipped. "The New War will be an ultimate test of Miller's skepticism, and one hopes he is wrong. Meanwhile, it might also be remembered that in the hard power world of international affairs and terrorism, there is no free lunch."[5]

Walter LaFeber was a gentle soul and a mild-mannered teacher-scholar, but he possessed a contrarian streak. During his valedictory lecture at the Beacon Theater in April 2006, he recalled a story about the 19th century British philosopher Samuel Butler. At a London dinner party, a wealthy dowager once asked Butler: "Why does God tolerate historians?" Butler thought for a moment and then replied: "Well, you see Madam, it is because since God himself cannot change the past, he is obliged to tolerate historians who can."[6]

Our mentor devoted his entire career to seeking, uncovering, and disseminating new insights into the past. Over and over again, he encouraged us to challenge conventional wisdom and to think otherwise. He taught us to recognize the signs of the Tocqueville problem and to utilize our historical sensibilities to address it. He showed us that scholarship is a powerful tool with the potential to contribute to the public good. Most important, he reminded us that while

there is no free lunch, there is also no giving up. That is Walter LaFeber's legacy to us, the contributors to this volume, and, we hope, to its readers as well.

## Endnotes

[1] On LaFeber's identification of the cruel paradox, see chapter 4, p.78 (of current manuscript)

[2] LaFeber, *Deadly Bet*, 38.

[3] Examples include Walter LaFeber, "The Bush Doctrine," *Diplomatic History* 26 (Fall 2002): 543-558; and "The Rise and Fall of Colin Powell and the Powell Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (Spring 2009): 71-93.

[4] LaFeber email to Andrew Tisch, August 20, 2008.

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

[6] Walter LaFeber, "A Half-Century of Friends, Foreign Policy, and Great Losers," April 26, 2006, https://www.cornell.edu/video/walter-lafeber-beacon-theatre-2006.