

In Memoriam: Walter LaFeber

It says a lot about Walter LaFeber, who passed away on March 9, at age 87, that at his retirement from Cornell University in 2006, he gave a farewell lecture at Manhattan's Beacon Theater, to a packed house of 3,000 mostly former students. The event was supposed to be held at the American Museum of Natural History, also on the Upper West Side, but such was the clamor for tickets that it was moved to the Beacon.

I had joined the Cornell faculty two years earlier, in 2004, just as Walt was entering phased retirement. I hadn't known him well before that, though of course I had read and reread his work and featured it in various historiographical essays I wrote in graduate school. (In a required essay accompanying my PhD application in 1989, on the topic "Which work of history do you wish you had written, and why?" I agonized over whether I should select William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* or LaFeber's *The New Empire*; I ultimately chose the former, but worked in a mention of the latter.)

Even before my arrival in Ithaca I had heard that Walt's classroom lectures were legendary, and I decided I had to take one in for myself. One morning in my first semester I slipped into the back of the hall just as class began. The topic that day was the Louisiana Purchase and its aftermath, and as I took my seat I saw the great man down at the front, tall and imposing, his back turned, jotting a three-point outline on the blackboard. Then he launched in, low-key and without fanfare. Within minutes, I could see what made him such a mesmerizing teacher to generations of Cornell students, who routinely gave him standing ovations at the end of the semester. There was, to begin with, his astonishing ability to speak entirely without notes, in elegant, fully formed paragraphs, using clear concepts and ordinary language, while never losing sight of the broad topic. (When over lunch I asked Walt about this extraordinary talent, he offered a characteristically self-effacing reply: "When you've taught the course as long as I have, Fred, you just know the stuff." Sensing that I thought there was more to it, he offered "Keep it simple, follow a clean line," then changed the topic.) There was also his evident erudition, which he wore lightly but which came through with unmistakable force. Most important of all, I decided, the lecture revealed Walt's remarkable talent for conveying, vividly and memorably, the interplay of structural forces and individual human beings in history. Thus we were informed of the geopolitical elements that were instrumental in the Louisiana Purchase, and the crucial role played by American institutions, but we also learned about Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr and their fascinating rivalry—all of it, again, without as much as a notecard on the lectern.

Not coincidentally, Walt's superb U.S. diplomatic history textbook, *The American Age*, which first appeared in 1989, showed this same ability to weave together structure and human agency within a single narrative, reminding us that, although impersonal forces may make events in history possible, individuals make those events happen. I

may have understood this aspect of the book better than most because I relied heavily on it in writing my own lectures, in 1993, in my first job, at UC Santa Barbara. Night after night, as I scrambled to get ready for the next day's class, I would dip into *TAA* and pull out this or that colorful quote, this or that analytical formulation, to flesh out my lecture notes. One passage, concerning Woodrow Wilson's transcendent importance in American foreign relations, sticks in the mind (perhaps because I've quoted in class so many times): "Wilson has become the most influential architect of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy in part because he so eloquently clothed the bleak skeleton of U.S. self-interest in the attractive garb of idealism. Nothing, after all, could be more self-interested for Americans than to have the rest of the world act according to their principles."

After his retirement, Walt continued to be active in campus life, frequently hosting, with his wife Sandy, groups of students, faculty, and spouses in their gracious home just above the Fall Creek Suspension Bridge. My wife and I treasured those evenings, but even more I loved the leisurely lunches Walt and I had on a regular basis. We would talk about books, about the profession, about Cornell, about our families, and it always felt like we were just getting started when time ran out. Two hours never moved faster. What Walt did not do in these encounters, however, was to talk about himself or his work. At most, I'd squeeze a few mumbled words out of him on his current project or most recent publication, whereupon he'd shift the conversation. Others noticed this same side of him, as Andy Rotter reminded me soon after we learned the tragic news. "But enough about me' might have been Walt's mantra," Andy said. Exactly right. Still, I now wish I had pressed harder during the lunch conversations, asked more questions—about his youth; about the Wisconsin PhD program and the heady experience of working alongside the likes of Williams, Fred Harvey Harrington, Lloyd Gardner, and Tom McCormick, among others; about SHAFR's early years; about the turmoil at Cornell in 1969, when he was department chair; about his approach to research and writing. So much left unsaid.

In my last communication with him, over email barely a month before he passed, he again deflected attention from himself and toward me, saying merely that he was grateful for his eighty-seven years. That's who he was, to the end. It's a great privilege of my life to have known and spent time with this extraordinary man: a master teacher, a distinguished scholar, a true gentleman, and, most of all, a deeply humane and generous person.

—Fredrik Logevall
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