

## Chapter Seven

### Turning to Asia: *The Clash*

**Anne L. Foster and Andrew Rotter**

Walkerton, Indiana was named for James H. Walker, a banker who in the middle of the 19th century helped build the Cincinnati, Peru, and Chicago Railroad. The CP&C ran through Walkerton. The town was planned by surveyors for the railroad; its track went straight, north and south, and as in hundreds of Midwestern towns, the streets of Walkerton were laid out on the strictest of grids, every turn a right angle. Walter LaFeber was raised in Walkerton. Its population, three years before he was born in 1933, was 1137. His father ran a grocery and dry goods store. Walt worked in the store from a very young age, stocking shelves and, eventually, managing the cash register. His close friend and colleague Thomas McCormick once said: “If you want to understand Walter LaFeber, you have to visit Walkerton, Indiana,” as McCormick told one of the authors (Rotter) he had once done.

LaFeber was not the only prominent US diplomatic historian to come from a small town. Lloyd Gardner grew up in Delaware, Ohio. William Appleman Williams, who helped train LaFeber, McCormick, and Gardner at the University of Wisconsin, hailed from Atlantic, Iowa—an aspirational place name if there ever was one. Wayne Cole, another Wisconsin PhD from the same period, came from Manning, Iowa, a town of 1800 people during his youth. And it was not only foreign relations Revisionists who hailed from small towns. Thomas A. Bailey, LaFeber’s MA supervisor

It may seem counterintuitive that historians interested in the place of the United States in the world would grow up in towns like Walkerton, Delaware, and Atlantic. Yet there are several possible reasons why this might not be a coincidence. First, it may be, as Gardner has suggested, that diplomatic historians came disproportionately from small towns because “there were not enough problems in small towns, so historians-to-be sought out the wider world--if even in historical imagination.”<sup>1</sup> Bright, curious youngsters might chafe against the limitations of small towns. They read and dream of far-off lands, creating for themselves a vicarious cosmopolitanism that offered intellectual and emotional release from their perceived isolation. This is a common enough expression in fiction and memoir—Jay Gatsby? Ronald Reagan?—and one that makes sense to Gardner from his own experience. Its lessons may apply most fully to historians with international interests, and perhaps with particular strength to those whose feet remain planted in the United States, unwilling or unable to detach from the home place entirely, but eager to look outward from it in the search for encounter, interaction, or comparison.

It is also worth noting that LaFeber, along with Williams, Gardner, and McCormick, grew up in the Midwest. David S. Brown has argued that historians “beyond the frontier” developed a uniquely regional perspective on United States history and the nation’s place in the world. Starting with Frederick Jackson Turner and continuing through Charles Beard, then to the Wisconsin historians John Hicks, Merle Curti, William Hesselstine, Fred Harvey Harrington (LaFeber’s graduate mentor, who was raised in upstate New York but moved to Wisconsin, and stayed), and Williams, these thoughtful Midwesterners developed a world view that embraced popular dissent in the service of grass roots democracy, a populism generally shorn of its sour impulses for racism and anti-Semitism, and a faith in community that far more closely resembled Portage, Wisconsin (where Turner grew up) or Papillion, Nebraska (Curti’s birthplace) than it

did Manhattan, New Haven, or Cambridge. To paraphrase John Quincy Adams, they went not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. There were monsters enough at home, in the form of unbounded *laissezfaire* capitalism, Eastern elitist hubris (usually found in liberal internationalists), and politicians whose commitment to democracy was no better than skin deep. The Indiana-born Beard and his Midwestern successors at Wisconsin crafted a critique of US foreign policy that, as Brown has written, “appealed to both a neo-isolationist right and an anti-imperialist left.” Their populism did not diminish their curiosity about the wider world.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the isolation of small towns and the cosmopolitan dreams they might have inspired can be overstated. The Walkerton, Indianas of the world were not nearly as distant from international networks or knowledge as the mythology of the frontier would predict. Having moved from the East Coast to the Midwest college town of Champaign, Illinois in 1999, the historian Kristin Hoganson set out to examine her new, smallish city, in search of the heart of the heartland. Seeking the local, she found instead the global, “the histories of foreign relations” and “a mesh of global entanglements stemming from searches for security and power.” She learned that it had long been thus; even in the 19th century, Champaign and its surrounding county had been closely connected to world markets and affairs apparently far distant, but in truth as present each day as the prairie wind.<sup>3</sup> Champaign, the city, was considerably more populous than Walkerton in 1930, but Champaign County was a good deal smaller than St. Joseph’s County, Indiana, which held not only tiny Walkerton but vigorous South Bend, a short drive away.

Common to both counties and towns was the railroad. In the late 19th century, the Illinois Central, underwritten by British capital, carried pork in its refrigerated cars from Champaign to Chicago and ports beyond, then ships conveyed it to markets in Europe, where prices for meat were fully a Midwestern concern.<sup>4</sup> In Walkerton, during the same era, C. W. N.



of Japanese products that earned American dollars. Still, the Midwest was attached to Japan in other ways. Hundreds of graduates of its colleges and universities traveled to Japan as missionaries. University of Illinois agronomist O. H. Peabody learned Japanese farming methods during a three-year stint in Japan, then returned to teach them to Champaign County farmers.<sup>7</sup> St. Joseph's County had a visitation of a different sort: the arrival from Japan in 1830 of the invasive plant species autumn olive, which overwhelmed some native specimens by blocking the sunlight they needed to thrive.<sup>8</sup>

It is unlikely, of course, that young Walter LaFeber was aware of these many connections between Japan and his native Midwest. Indeed, Asia as a whole played a limited role in LaFeber's teaching and scholarly interests, at least prior to 1975. The exception to this was China, about which the "Wisconsin school" showed a great deal of curiosity, and about which McCormick wrote his dissertation and first book, *China Market*<sup>9</sup> LaFeber himself brushed against East Asia in his first book, *The New Empire*, which considered the run-up to war with Spain and the burst of overseas imperialism that accompanied it, including the annexation of the Philippines in 1898.<sup>10</sup>

Readers of that book, or of the chapter about it in this volume, will know that its focus is on domestic economics and politics in the United States, and that its secondary concerns are the European imperial powers, Spain, and Cuba, not the Philippines itself. LaFeber's subsequent publications included edited books on the diplomacy of John Quincy Adams and the Cold War--each of which includes some material on US relations with Asia--and monographs on the Cold War largely in Europe, the US response to revolutions in Central America, and the Panama Canal.<sup>11</sup> In a series of short articles published between 1968 and 1970, three in *Current History* and one in *The Nation*, LaFeber considered the US exercise of power in Asia, with a focus on the

triangular relationship among the United States, Japan and China. In 1975, LaFeber published “Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina: 1942-1945,” in the *American Historical Review*. The article’s title suggests its emphasis, which was on high policymaking in the United States and Britain, not so much on Indochina—a portmanteau place name conferred by imperial France. Excellent and much-cited, the piece nevertheless appeared to be a one-off, for after its publication he turned his attention to Central and South America.<sup>12</sup>

As was often the case, part of the spur for a turn to Asia by LaFeber came from current events. There was, of course, the war in Vietnam. And then, starting in the late 1970s and reaching fever pitch in the 1980s, many Americans feared that Japan, their erstwhile protégé after World War II, was bent on and poised to overtake the United States, at least economically. Harvard professor Ezra F. Vogel’s *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* was among the most provocatively titled and carefully argued (and therefore probably least read) of a series of articles and books trumpeting Japan’s rise.

the four-volume Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations.<sup>17</sup> The book required a

nature of misunderstanding changes, and it is complicated by the desire some people from each country have to learn about the other. Americans and Japanese, although Americans more forcefully and with more harmful consequences, have racial views shaping their interactions with each other and with other Asians. Chapter one tells the “opening of Japan” story a bit differently from what high school history typically teaches, demonstrating that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese officials were seeking the most sensible way to engage with the rest of the world. US actions did force their hand, but the Japanese



“Oriental” schools for Japanese, Chinese and Korean immigrants in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt negotiated a compromise to prevent that, but at the cost of a Gentleman’s Agreement with Japan that would limit further immigration to the United States. Japanese officials agreed, but understood what the Agreement signaled. Relations became so contentious that each country drafted war plans aimed at the other.<sup>20</sup>

Officials in both Japan and the United States worked on ways to demonstrate both power and peaceful intentions, and through World War I, managed peacefully. Potential problems arose again in the aftermath of that war, when Japanese officials sought what they believed was their due as an Allied power and great nation: land and rights in China, Germany’s former possessions in Asia, and a racial equality clause. President Woodrow Wilson, constrained by both his racism and his concern for traditional US policies toward China, tried to thwart Japanese ambition. He only halfway prevailed, but that was sufficient to alert Japanese officials that the United States was more stumbling block than equal.

In the subsequent three chapters, five (1921-1931), six (1931-1937), and seven (1937-1941),

and both Britain and Japan subordinated their interests to what the United States found acceptable, peace reigned.

The US vision for the world would not prevail for long and abruptly collapsed with the onset of the Depression. During the early 1930s, US capital ceased to flow. The Japanese responded by prioritizing political and military ambitions, although whether they did so in service of or instead of financial ambitions depends on one's point of view. Much of chapter six reveals the inadequacy of US policy tools for confronting a nation, in this case Japan, which had stopped subscribing to the US view of the world order. Expansion into China and a closed economy initially seemed to help Japan, which had lower unemployment and faster growth than the United States. But as LaFeber writes, the Japanese decision to join Germany and Italy in the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 "began a five-year era in which Japan moved from weakness to weakness and the United States moved from weakness to strength."<sup>21</sup>

Japan's direct clashes with US interests in China revealed that Japan was more dependent on the United States, its market, its capital, and its technology, than it had recognized. In 1937, the United States was not yet prepared to capitalize on this Japanese weakness.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's disastrous attempt

The other critical part of this story is Japan's dependence on imported raw materials, and what Japanese policymakers believed they needed to do to preserve their access. As LaFeber notes, in Japan, the militarists' solution, "to cordon off large parts of Asia to obtain economic self-sufficiency," increasingly won out during the late 1930s. In the United States, disputes between officials with more experience in China and those with more experience in Japan meant that the United States continued to pursue both negotiations with Japan and military support for China after 1937. Negotiations revolved, as always, around China. Japanese officials insisted that their troops must stay in China. US officials insisted that they must leave. At stake? Who got to trade with and invest freely in China, and it turned out only war could settle that question.

Coverage of the war years 1941-1945 is a familiar story well told. LaFeber emphasizes the disparity in resources, how scarcity drove Japan and abundance enabled the United States to pursue military strategies and choose diplomatic policies leading to defeat for one and victory for the other. Even while emphasizing that the United States fought to destroy closed economic blocs and to promote "free markets globalized," LaFeber also highlights the pernicious effects of race on the war in Asia, noting that many US officials believed that unless Japan was "destroyed to the point of unconditional surrender," it would rise again to lead the rest of Asia to oppose all white people. The anti-Japanese sentiment prompting the US government to send Japanese-Americans, but not German-Americans or Italian-Americans, to concentration camps the Americans called relocation camps, is also part of the war story in *The Clash*.

The bulk of this long chapter focuses on the interplay between military strategy, which after mid-1942 was shaped by the knowledge that the United States was in position to win the war even if it might take some time, and by plans for the postwar world, which still looked to be a contentious one. China, Britain and the United States had different visions for world order in

postwar Asia, and US officials even quarreled among themselves. All the US officials agreed, however, that this time the US vision would be backed by more than diplomacy and economic power. As the war in Europe wound down in spring 1945, and Josef Stalin began to make plans to honor the Soviet pledge to enter the war against Japan, hints of the full scale of postwar conflict began to emerge. The new US president, Harry Truman, scrambling to make sure that the war ended on US terms and with the United States prepared to occupy Japan alone, authorized the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The US effort to transform Japan into the shepherd of the US order in Asia during the postwar Occupation is the story of chapter nine, which covers just 1945-1951. LaFeber evokes the seesaw emotions of 1945, with jubilation at victory and elation at the massive amounts of US economic, military and political power vying with fear about Soviet intentions and the levels of poverty and destruction in Japan, China, and Europe needing to be addressed immediately, as well as latent worry about a resurging depression. In Japan, US officials moved to completely remake politics and the economy during the immediate postwar years, but continued economic turmoil, concerns about disorder worldwide, and growing Soviet power prompted a more conservative turn after 1947. As LaFeber argued, Japan was “less an end in itself than the means...for achieving the larger regional and global purposes of US foreign policy.”<sup>22</sup> Japanese views and voices are muted in this chapter compared to others, although reading carefully reveals that Japanese officials were biding their time and influencing what they could. The outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula made the Japanese task easier, so much so that LaFeber quotes Japanese prime minister Yoshida Shigeru as calling the conflict “a gift from the gods.”<sup>23</sup>

The United Sta

also needed lots of supplies for the US effort in Korea. Both US needs helped Japan's economy

balance against the United States. The final full chapter, covering the years 1973 until the time the book went to press, explores those years when Japan's economic successes coincided with

Yet the reviews were hardly uncritical. The reviewer for the *New York Times* found the book, at over 400 pages of text, heavy going.<sup>29</sup> Edward Drea pointed to weaknesses in LaFeber's treatment of military history—vital, he said, to an understanding of the US-Japan relationship over time.<sup>30</sup> Gluck and other reviewers recognized that LaFeber was not a Japan expert, and while that was not in their view altogether a drawback, it did lead, according to E. Bruce Reynolds, to some errors in LaFeber's account of pre-Meiji Japan. Neu pointed out that *The Clash* neglected important themes, such as the role of American missionaries in Japan, the interaction of popular culture, the images held by elite groups, or the misconceptions and misunderstandings bred by the great chasms between the two cultures." Kristof detected a category error that led to an over-focus on politics and diplomacy to the detriment of sociological and anthropological perspectives and, in a backhanded compliment, praised LaFeber for writing "so knowledgeably without the benefit of the Japanese language that I wondered why any of us ever bothered to slave away over it."<sup>31</sup> China, in LaFeber's telling the main object of the clash between the United States and Japan, was treated as a passive country, what Gluck called "a more or less inert object of competing imperial attentions," an especially serious shortcoming in light of events at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a poor predictor of diplomacy in the new millennium.<sup>32</sup> Eileen Scully's long review in *Reviews in American History* picked a variety of bones with *The Clash*, most significantly with its title (and thesis), which flirted with "teleology"

LaFeber surely anticipated some of these criticisms. He knew that his lack of Japanese



more reciprocal, showing impact in both directions. In this sense, it demonstrates the promise of international history. The book also took twice as long to write as he expected,<sup>37</sup> which may be a cautionary tale for international historians.

The contrasting biographies of US and Japanese leaders featured in several chapters of *The Clash* both reflect the still traditional approach in this book, focused as they are on the individual leaders and their potential to effect change, and the effort to explain historical developments from both sides. Chapter four, covering the pivotal years 1912-1920, opens with vivid descriptions of Japanese leader Yamagata Aritomo and US President Woodrow Wilson. Both men had been shaped by political upheaval taking place in their youth, which both saw in part as stemming from racial contention, although they perceived that contention in different ways, naturally. For each, assuring political stability at home depended in part on exerting sufficient power overseas.<sup>38</sup>

Japan and the United States clashed in significant ways between 1912-1920, over immigration, the racial equality clause Japan championed at the Paris Peace Conference, and in their different visions for China. The backgrounds of Yamagata and Wilson helped shape the nature of those disputes and their resolutions. Rarely did history see a pair of leaders so instructively matched in background and outlook. In later chapters, too, compelling biographies help illuminate the history, as in the chapter ten discussion of Kishi Nobusuke, Japanese prime minister, and his efforts to help navigate a particularly tense time in US-Japanese relations in the mid-1950s.<sup>39</sup> LaFeber drew attention to Kishi's ardent nationalism, his love of aspects of American culture, and his shrewd ability to maneuver through a variety of difficult situations throughout his career.

LaFeber's efforts to understand both sides stretch beyond biography. Given that at least part of the impetus for writing the book was the crude criticisms of Japan in the 1980s from US pundits, it is not surprising that the chapters on 1960-1973 (when Japan first began consistently to run a positive trade balance with the United States after 1966) and 1973-1990s (when Americans began to believe Japan had potential to overtake the United States economically) pay particular attention to the Japanese rationale for following economic as well as political and strategic policies which ended up benefiting Japan significantly more than the United States.

In the midst of the US war in Vietnam, for instance, Japan carefully began looking for ways to distance itself from the United States. It joined ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, even providing one-fifth of the initial funding. As LaFeber wrote, US officials "absorbed in Vietnam" completely "missed the importance" of ASEAN.<sup>40</sup> Conflict only grew from that point. LaFeber recounts how Japanese officials were "confused" by statements from President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, seeming to indicate Japan should perhaps acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>41</sup> *The Clash* still has as its primary purpose explaining how and why the United States acted as it did in relationship with Japan, but more than his other works, it also represents the views and goals of Japanese officials for that relationship.

Because *The Clash* concerns USJapan relations, it is in one sense as traditional a study as they come in the foreign relations subfield, Revisionist branch, of course, in which subtitles tended to offer some small variation on "The United States and [Your Choice of Other Country Here]." It is, in many respects, vintage LaFeber. Despite having the breadth and feel of a textbook, its sources include, as most of his books do, archival documents, in this case from Washington, New York, Princeton, Cambridge (MA) and New Haven, and every presidential library from West Branch, Iowa (Hoover) to Austin (Johnson). Its emphases are economics and



pursued an international history approach in her dissertation. His obvious skepticism seems to have stemmed from two suspicions. First, he represented the best of a traditional kind of scholar, someone who returned again and again to similar themes and topics, investigating them ever

Alexis de Tocqueville saw them: restless, striving, acquisitive, noisily democratic, and bent on maritime trade. The Japanese valued “consensus and harmony.”<sup>45</sup> LaFeber makes numerous references to culture, broadly defined, in the text. He discusses films—*Patria*, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, *Godzilla*

observers often commented on the lewdness and lack of discipline among Americans, while Americans expressed surprise when Japanese demonstrated knowledge and initiative.

The heart of the dilemma was Japan's ambition to join the ranks of great powers as an equal, which included an ambition to be an Asian imperial power. As they steadily achieved that ambition, they attracted both grudging admiration and racialized scorn. As LaFeber reported the words of Finley Peter Dunne's character Mr. Dooley: "A subjick race is on'y funny whin it's raaly subjick. About three years ago [1904] I stopped laughin' at Japanese jokes."<sup>49</sup> Mr. Dooley evoked Japan's growing power in the Pacific, but in the United States, Japanese faced school segregation in California, a Gentleman's Agreement to end that segregation leading to de facto exclusion of Japanese immigration, with that exclusion codified in the 1924 Exclusion Act, as well as anti-Asian riots. Race was deployed to restri

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celebration of Victory Day (colloquially called Victory over Japan Day) drew people wearing “American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars paraphernalia” and using racist epithets.<sup>52</sup> The pervasiveness of racism and racial imagery shaped relations between Japanese and Americans, although in *The Clash*, anecdotes and examples tend to speak for themselves. LaFeber does not explore their meaning and effect at length; race is perhaps not quite a discrete category of analysis for him.

*The Clash* was published just as an influential group of historians were turning to culture—again, broadly conceived—as a way of explaining US foreign relations. Cultural history itself was having an extended moment. Borrowing from anthropology, most notably the Weberian cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who defined culture (both productively and confoundingly) as “webs of significance,” historians increasingly told stories about common folks, finding meaning in their everyday practices, religious rituals, language, and gestures.<sup>53</sup>

Foreign relations historians found ways to apply cultural history to their own practices. They were open to using sources then alien to those in the field, among them fiction, visual images, notes in the margins of texts, and accounts concerning diplomatic etiquette or the expression of emotion. To some, this meant investigating non-state actors and their organizations. Others saw culture inscribed in the actions of the state itself. Michael Hunt’s influential book *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* published a decade before *The Clash*, borrowed from Williams the analytical category ideology, which Hunt couched in cultural terms, praising Geertz but shying away from substituting “culture” for “ideology,” evidently because the former lacked sufficient parsimony or rigor.<sup>54</sup> Others proved less hesitant. Some argued that categories of analysis such as race, gender, and religion, were part of the larger construct of culture, being ways of weaving webs of significance or creating “structures of meaning,” another

Geertzian definition.<sup>55</sup> The interdisciplinary field of cultural studies had a role here too, insisting on interrogating the United States as an empire, not unlike other empires—an argument congenial to the Revisionists, though the ponderous use of theory and often abstruse language of cultural studies scholars limited their influence on foreign relations historians.<sup>56</sup>

Walter LaFeber was not a foreign relations culturalist. His references to culture were broad, subject to binary descriptions that an unfriendly critic might today scorn as “essentialist.” Again and again, *The Clash* advanced Revisionist arguments, such that there was no mistaking the centrality of economic factors in its analysis. Convinced that power mattered most and that it inhered only in the state, aware of the cultural turn in the field, and doubtless aware that some of his students and former students were at minimum curious about it, LaFeber seems to acknowledge it without endorsing it. At one point, discussing the early John F. Kennedy administration’s policy toward Japan, he writes: “The two cultures might have appeared to be converging, but foreign policies do not always follow culture.”<sup>57</sup> Summing things up at the end of the book, he adds this: “That much of the conflict is due to centuries-old cultural differences is apparent. Other causes, however, are too often lost. There is little culturally based about US free trade, ‘one-world’ policies after 1945.”<sup>58</sup> The final sentence of *The Clash* declares that “the primary cause” of conflict between the two nations—“the centuries-old rivalry to decide which system was to lead in developing Asian and especially Chinese markets”—would remain the chief influence on US-Japan relations.<sup>59</sup> It could hardly be clearer: economics mattered most.

For LaFeber, culture was a feature of US-Japan relations, but it did not determine them, nor did it shape them significantly. Race, independent in his view of a larger cultural framework, helped to explain mutual



ascribe to LaFeber's analysis a belief in the culture of capitalism, the view that faith in private

factors, that the pursuit of an economic Open Door abroad was the predicate for an American empire tha

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War, 1945-1966 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967, with nine subsequent editions); idem., *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); idem., *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Walter F. LaFeber, "Our Illusory Affair with Japan," *The Nation* (March 11, 1968) pp. 330-338; "China and Japan: A Matter of Options," *Current History*

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<sup>33</sup> Eileen P. Scully, "Men, Maps, and Markets: First Causes and Last Resorts in US-Japan Relations," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 759-65 (762).

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dissertation and later book: Anne L. Foster, **Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1914-1941** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).