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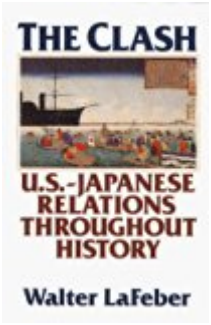
Walter LaFeber. *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. xxii + 508 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-03950-4.



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A recent edition of *The Economist* carried a short article on the forced departure, in early July, of Toshiyuki Takano from his post as director-general of the North American bureau at the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Takano, who was seen as a rising star and a future ambassador to the U.S., was apparently banished to the relative obscurity of the Ministry's training school as a result of public comments he made which implied that the Japanese government would back the U.S. by coming to the assistance of Taiwan if it was attacked by China. This incident foreshadowed the orientation of Keizo Obuchi's new government, which came into office at the end of July. The Obuchi government is thought to be critical of the North American bureau's excessive sympathy for Washington's point of view on issues of regional diplomacy and economic reform.[1] Observers have emphasized that the selection of Obuchi, and his cabinet and the LDP's new executive, was masterminded by Noboru Takeshita, a former prime minister, and leader of the largest faction in the LDP, who perceived Obuchi's predecessor, Ryutaro Hashimoto, as too independent and too committed to economic reform. The Obuchi government is expected to resist, or at least to move even more slowly on, the economic reforms favoured by, what Robert Wade and Frank Veneroso call "the Wall Street--Treasury--IMF Complex."[2]

These developments nicely encapsulate the central concerns of Walter LaFeber's new history of U.S.-Japan relations. He began writing *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History* at the beginning of the 1990s, not long after the end of the Cold War had accentuated concerns about the two countries' politico-military relationship, at the same time as there was growing friction on the economic front. *The Clash* is, in fact, the latest in a series of influential, and often timely, works of diplomatic history which LaFeber has produced over the past thirty years. Based at Cornell University since 1959, LaFeber was a student of William Appleman Williams and a major figure in the rise of New Left Diplomatic History in the 1960s. He gained a reputation following the 1963 publication of *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898*. Challenging the established view of the day, *The New Empire* represented U.S. continental expansion, the war

with Spain and the formal and informal imperial expansion which followed as part of a continuum rooted in the imperatives of a rising capitalist society.[3] ***The New Empire***, which won the Albert J. Beveridge Award, helped to shift the debate over the emergence of the U.S. empire in the late nineteenth century in the direction of economic imperatives and by the 1970s LaFeber had become one of the most influential diplomatic historians in North America.[4]

In the late 1970s, he turned his attention increasingly to U.S. relations with Latin America, producing an important volume on the Panama Canal in 1978.[5] This was followed in the 1980s by a companion volume on the Central American crisis. This book contributed to the growing debate in the United States which had been brought on by the Reagan administration's Cold War revivalism and its efforts to roll back the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, and block the revolutions under way in neighbouring El Salvador and Guatemala. In ***Inevitable Revolutions***, as in his earlier work, LaFeber sought to transcend traditional diplomatic history and attempt an analysis of the overall "impact" of U.S. foreign policy on both "the peoples and institutions of Central America."[6] He highlighted the way the economies of Central America had been "stunted" by the region's dependence on a small number of export crops or minerals that went to the industrialized countries, especially to the United States. He also emphasized that this dependency distorted Central American politics because the crucial export sectors were under the control of either foreign capital or local elites who were dependent on outside support. He sought to refute the widespread assumption in North America that foreign investment and free trade brought economic prosperity and political stability to Central America. From his perspective, foreign investment and the unequal terms of trade were crucial to "misshaping" the history of Central America "until revolution" emerged as the "only instrument" which could "break the hammerlock held by the local oligarchy and foreign capitalists." LaFeber emphasized the importance of U.S. political and military power which, he argued, bore "considerable responsibility" for the "revolutions." For LaFeber, the explanation for the Central American crisis ultimately lay "in the history of how the class-ridden remains of the Spanish empire turned into the revolutionary-ridden parts of the North American system."[7]

Just as ***Inevitable Revolutions*** illuminated the Central American crisis of the 1980s and its relationship to U.S. power, LaFeber's latest book illuminates the United States's complex, and crisis-ridden, relationship with Japan via an often penetrating survey of U.S.-Japan relations over the past 150 years. ***The Clash*** revolves around three themes. First, the author argues that, with the exception of the period 1931 to 1945, "Americans and Japanese have generally seen each other as partners in most East Asian affairs," despite the fact that "they have in truth endured a series of sometimes highly dangerous clashes" since the mid-nineteenth century. This cycle began with Commodore Perry's use of force to "open up" Japan in the early 1850s and was reflected much more recently in the post-Cold War public opinion surveys of the early 1990s which indicated that people in both countries perceived each other, "rather than the Soviet military," as the "greatest threat" to their respective security and well-being. The second theme of LaFeber's book is that "the root of these problems has been and continues to be, a clash between two different forms of capitalism." LaFeber represents contemporary Japan as being a product of the past "four hundred years" during which Japan emerged as "a compact, homogenous, closely knit society that, for good reason, is terrified of disorder" and "has sought to avoid disorder with a strong central government, which guides the subtle, informal networks that run the economy." By contrast, for over two hundred years the history of the United States of America "has formed a sprawling, pluralistic, open-ended society that, for good reason, is terri-

fied of economic depressions and sought to avoid them by creating an open international marketplace" (p. xviii). A third, and equally important, theme relates to the way in which "the clash of the two capitalisms has focused on China." As LaFeber emphasizes, U.S.-Japan politico-military and economic relations have, in large part, revolved around the repeated shifts between cooperation and conflict in their respective policies toward China (pp. xviii-xix).

LaFeber argues that his survey of U.S.-Japan relations between the 1850s and the 1990s seeks to provide "a quite different history" of U.S.-Japan relations than that which emerged in 1995 from the "embittered debates" in the U.S. and Japan "over how to view the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." In his view these debates highlighted the way in which both sides seek to manipulate history to "justify their own policies past and present." To emphasize that the specter of history looms over contemporary Japan-U.S. relations he concludes with a quote from William Faulkner that "The past is never dead. It is not even the past" (p. xxii). In this context, he argues that because "the causes of the U.S.-Japan clashes have deep historical roots," it is possible to control the basic causes but "(t)hey will not be eradicated" (pp. 398-399). And, "(c)rises will continue to test whether Americans and Japanese have learned from their history." He concludes that "(f)or Americans, the test will be whether they can accept an Asia for and by Asians in which the United States will have a relatively declining role both economically and, despite strong Pentagon objections, militarily." However, he is not optimistic that the U.S. will pass this test: "Two hundred years of history and especially the sense of being the post-1989 global superpower make such an acceptance most unlikely." And "Asian markets offer too many profits; a growing defense budget for an already all-powerful U.S. military is too tempting." At the same time, "(f)or the Japanese one test will be whether they have learned, finally, to view other Asians differently than they have historically, and whether they can maintain institutional safeguards on their own military." A second "test will be how Japan can maintain its social and political order against the typhoon of new technologies and foreign financial power that threatens to engulf that centuries old order." He argues that the "historical record" in relation to both Japan and the U.S. does not point to "an easy new relationship to replace the old." Citing a 1993 editorial from Asahi Shimbun, which viewed the post-Cold War period as "an era of genuine competition" between the U.S. and Japan "in which any attempt at equivocation simply will not do," he concludes that "History...promises continued clashes" because "the century-old rivalry to decide which system was to lead in developing Asian and especially Chinese markets--will continue to shape both United States and Japanese domestic and foreign policies in the twenty-first century." However, "learning from that past can offer better understanding between these two peoples, and--if they are lucky--can lead to the understanding that the clashes must be accepted, managed" and "limited" (pp. 404-405).

This is a very impressive account of U.S.-Japan relations which neither celebrates nor demonizes the history of U.S. or Japanese politico-military and economic power. LaFeber's deployment of a succession of illuminating anecdotes and thumb-nail sketches is combined effectively with a thorough and often critical diplomatic history and political economy of the United States's relationship with Japan since the 1850s. However, like all books which went to press or were published in 1997, ***The Clash*** has been somewhat overtaken by events. Nevertheless, LaFeber's critical historical perspective means that, although the emergence of the East Asian Crisis by the second half of 1997 raises some questions about his analysis of the prospects for U.S.-Japan relations in the final pages of the book, it does not undermine his main themes. In fact, LaFeber's book provides both good background to, and an historical framework for, the growing regional crisis, and what it

might mean for the U.S.-Japan relationship. At the same time, with regard to his framework, I would question his excessively sharp differentiation between Japan and the U.S. (an approach which overlooks the complex way in which their interaction has fuelled changes within each society, even as they are constantly represented as distinct) on the one hand and the reduction of both the U.S. and Japan to overly homogenous sets of attitudes, practices and values grounded in distinct forms of capitalism on the other hand. The complex way in which social and political change, cultural trends and capitalist development interact, and give rise to both continuity and discontinuity, is sometimes lost in his effort to drive home his main theme of an ongoing clash between a distinctly Japanese and a distinctly North American capitalism.

Another criticism, of his framework has to do with his relatively tight, albeit critical, focus on U.S. and Japanese elites. His earlier book on U.S.-Central American relations provides an interesting contrast here: ***Inevitable Revolutions*** embodied both a sustained critique of elites in the U.S. and Central America, and an effort to bring the people of Central America into his narrative in a way which both sympathized with and illuminated their predicament. While one can always question how successful he was in this regard, his book on Central America certainly reflected an acknowledgment that elite interests should not be conflated with the interests of the majority. By contrast ***The Clash*** never really addresses the serious inequalities and major social dislocations which have characterised the history and continue to characterise the contemporary circumstances of both countries. A major theme of ***The Clash*** is that U.S.-Japan relations are grounded in the differences between the two competing socio-economic systems. But an important aspect of those differences is not addressed: the degrees and kinds of social exclusion and economic exploitation which have characterized the North American or Japanese capitalist trajectories over time. Nor is the negative impact of U.S. and Japanese power on the region given much coverage, although it is alluded to at various points. By focusing ultimately on managing the U.S.-Japan relationship, in the context of the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era, questions about the social costs in the past, present and future are overlooked. Such an approach implies that even if the interests of political and business elites in Japan and the U.S. were not commensurate with the interests of the majority of the population who live in these countries (not to mention other peoples in the region directly affected by the long reach of U.S. and Japanese power) in the past, they are commensurate today. However, questions about both the social costs of capitalism (of whatever variety) and who regional elites actually represent may well be forcing themselves onto the agenda as the regional financial crisis becomes a more generalised social, political and economic crisis that even the United States will not apparently be insulated from.

Setting aside what might appear to be fairly major criticisms of the framework and some of the assumptions which appear to underpin ***The Clash***, there is no doubt that it is an important book. Although I think it lacks the degree of critical edge which was apparent in some of LaFeber's earlier work, it will undoubtedly become, and deserves to become, a major text on U.S.-Japanese relations. And despite my problems with the book's framework, I enjoyed reading it immensely. LaFeber has combined succinct analysis with a narrative flair that never ceases to be engaging, at the same time as he provides much to reflect upon. Both the specialist and the general reader will find this book of value. I highly recommend ***The Clash*** to anyone and everyone interested in the past, present and future of U.S.-Japan relations.

Notes:

[1]. "Too Nice to America?" ***The Economist*** August 8, 1998, 24.

[2]. "Leaving it to the Old Man," *The Economist* August 1, 1998, 24-25. Robert Wade and Frank Veneroso, "The Asian Crisis: The High Debt Model Versus the Wall Street--Treasury--IMF Complex," *New Left Review* no. 228. March/April 1998, 3-24.

[3]. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963.

[4]. One of LaFeber's best-known books is Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-1996*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. Also see Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad Since 1750*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

[5]. Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* New York: Oxford University Press, updated edition 1989; first published 1978.

[6]. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* New York: W. W. Norton, expanded edition 1984; first published 1983, 361. Also see Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, New York: W.W. Norton, second edition, revised and expanded 1993; first published 1983.

[7]. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 1984, 16-18, 302. For a discussion of LaFeber's earlier work generally, and his work on Central America specifically, see Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and U.S. Hegemony in the Americas 1898-1990*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 123-126, 176-177.

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