
Reviewed by Barbara Keys (Department of History, Harvard University)

Published on H-Diplo (January, 2000)

**Soft Imperialism**

At first glance, a book about a basketball star might seem like a strange departure for an esteemed historian of American foreign relations whose previous works have dealt with late nineteenth-century American expansionism, the Cold War, U.S. involvement in Central America, and U.S.-Japanese relations. But in telling the story of Michael Jordan’s rise to global marketing icon, Walter LaFeber is driven by the same concerns that have underpinned much of his earlier work; here, too, the central issue is the economically motivated expansion of American power. The real protagonist of this book is not Michael Jordan but American capitalism – in the guise of a sneaker company.

For LaFeber, the Nike Corporation epitomizes a new and uniquely powerful agent of capitalism: the “transnational corporation,” which has harnessed the technological developments of the postindustrial age (like satellites and cable television) to dominate world markets in novel ways. Powered for the most part by American capital and bent on spreading the American way of life, transnational corporations transmit American popular culture with an efficiency and pervasiveness that represent a quantum leap over earlier methods. Differing from the old multinationals in their use of foreign labor, dependence on global markets, and reliance on massive advertising campaigns, transnationals are, moreover, so big and so truly transnational that no single government can exercise more than limited control over their activities (pp. 55-57). In his very first book, LaFeber argued that America’s search for markets at the end of the nineteenth century was driven by a partnership between businessmen and politicians; his latest book suggests that, a century later, commercial empire builders have largely outgrown the need for government patronage.[1] In *Michael Jordan*, media moguls like Ted Turner and corporate executives like Nike’s Phil Knight are running the show, directing global flows of capital and labor with little heed to the feeble efforts of governments to control what happens within their countries’ increasingly porous borders.

Drawing on secondary sources and newspaper and magazine articles, LaFeber charts the development of the “new global capitalism” through the prism of Nike’s heady leap to global giant, largely through its enormously profitable marketing of Michael Jordan. From its humble beginnings in the 1960s, when Phil Knight sold running shoes from his car and netted about $364, Nike’s sales hit nearly $10 billion in the mid-1990s. Nike achieved these dizzying heights of success by piggybacking on the communications revolution of the 1970s and 1980s: the development of direct-broadcast satellites and fiber-optic cables, which allowed media pioneers like CNN’s founder Ted Turner to create truly global television—and hence truly global markets.[2]

In a series of deft and engaging vignettes, LaFeber sketches out these developments to explain how Nike and its gifted advertising team exploited this global marketing potential, notably through the clever and innovative marketing of Jordan. Unfortunately, much of the space in this very short book is devoted to Jordan’s professional basketball career, from 1984, when he was drafted by the Chicago Bulls (and signed his first contract with
Nike), through his (final) retirement last year. Along the way LaFeber covers the familiar stories of the Bulls’ first championship in 1991, the media fanfare surrounding the "Dream Team" at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, the murder of Jordan’s father, the outcry over Jordan’s high-stakes golf gambling, his stint in minor-league baseball, and his later years with the Bulls. This narrative ultimately does not reveal much about the “new global capitalism” that the book aims to explore. Jordan, after all, was a symbol, not an architect, of global capitalism. He was a spectacular athlete, certainly, and his athletic skills (along with his good looks and amiable, inoffensive personality) were necessary but are not in themselves sufficient to explain how he achieved global fame playing a sport that is still marginal in most of the world. The crucial ingredient was advertising: the tens of millions of dollars that Nike (and other companies) spent to shape Jordan’s image and then to saturate the media with that image.

Two of the book’s six chapters center on the critical public scrutiny that Nike’s and Jordan’s fame and power eventually engendered. In the mid-1990s, Nike came under attack for abuses at its Asian production facilities. Subsistence-level wages, child labor, suppression of efforts to unionize, and physical abuse of workers revealed the seamiest side of the "new global capitalism."[3] Jordan, ever loyal to his corporate sponsors, was criticized for not speaking out against conditions under which workers were earning less than two dollars per day to produce the shoes he was paid tens of millions of dollars to endorse. LaFeber argues that the bad press was the consequence of a “Faustian bargain” both Nike and Jordan had struck with the media: “to live off the media opened the possibility of being damned by the media” (p. 115). But the “bargain” was hardly “Faustian.” Relative to the benefits they received, the costs of their media dependence were minimal. By suggesting an equivalence between gain and harm, and by framing the public outcry over Nike’s labor practices as an inevitable consequence of fame and power, LaFeber avoids making clear judgments about the effects of global capitalism. In his telling, the abuse of Asian workers is a story about the media’s effects on Nike’s image, not about Nike’s real effects on real people. The dustjacket’s breathless declaration that “LaFeber’s examination of Nike and its particular dominion over the global marketplace is often (and justifiably) scathing” just doesn’t hold up; if anything, LaFeber is strangely soft on Nike’s “soft” imperialism.

LaFeber does believe that the soft power of American media and popular culture is dangerous: by ceaselessly expanding U.S. capital-driven culture, transnationals, he argues, are bound to provoke violent instability both abroad and at home. “The battlefields ahead,” he predicts, will revolve around “capital versus culture…between new, technological forms of capitalism versus cultures pressured to adjust to changes demanded by the capital” (p. 162). On the specific ways that Nike and Jordan have generated global instability or forced cultural adjustments, however, LaFeber can offer only sketchy and anecdotal evidence. On a topic so recent and so broad, of course, the data are scarce, and the most meaningful effects of Nike’s global iconization of Jordan are difficult to measure. To know the number of countries where National Basketball Association games are now broadcast, for example, tells us little about whether the glorification of black male stars has affected perceptions of race, or whether Nike’s relentless focus on individual achievement has left any trace on social dynamics, or whether the commodification and commercialization of sport that Nike pushed to new heights have significantly altered leisure and consumption patterns—to suggest just a few areas where the penetration of “Nike culture” might have had important consequences.

LaFeber takes the world’s passion for modern sport as a given, but it might have been worth exploring how it is that sport came to be, as Phil Knight called it, “the culture of the world” (p. 67). The alacrity with which peoples from all over the world have forsaken indigenous games in favor of modern sport, with its fetishization of individual achievement and records, quantification of results, standardization of rules and facilities, and rationalization of movement, is a remarkable and puzzling phenomenon.[4] It is, moreover, a process that took place largely before World War II and was dominated by British sports far more than by their American variants. Even today there is an odd disjuncture between the world’s enthusiastic embrace of much of American popular culture and its indifference to America’s major team sports. Soccer is “the world’s sport,” not football or baseball or even basketball. Leaving out this context lends the book an oddly ahistorical and U.S.-centric flavor: international stars of British-origin team sports, like the soccer star Pele, were important antecedents to Michael Jordan and arguably exercised far deeper influences, on far more people’s aspirations and lifestyles, than any athlete playing an American sport.

Although the book ultimately raises more questions than it answers, it is a significant harbinger of the way international relations will be studied in the 21st century. For diplomatic historians, the book reinforces the view
that important subjects of inquiry increasingly lie beyond the nation-state. For undergraduates in survey courses (apparently the book’s intended audience), Michael Jordan might serve as a provocative final reading assignment, pointing to some of the ways foreign relations are being reshaped in the new century. Finally, for “some of the more parochial members of the U.S. Congress, some academic departments, and a few publishing houses,” who seem to think that foreign relations are unimportant now that the Cold War is over, LaFeber’s book amply demonstrates that the opposite is true: “the nation’s overseas influence and power has only become more fascinating” (p. 14).

Notes


[2]. Many of these stories (the rise of ESPN, CNN, and Nike) are covered more fully in David Halberstam’s much longer and nearly hagiographic Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made (New York: Random House, 1999). It, too, makes the argument that Michael Jordan was “the signature commercial representative of [a] great new athletic-cultural-commercial empire” (p. 131).

[3]. Nike designs and markets shoes, but does not produce them: it uses independent contractors to run the production facilities. Nike could thus argue that it was not responsible for working conditions at factories producing Nike shoes.