Walter F. LaFeber was born in Walkerton, Indiana, on August 30, 1933, and he died in Ithaca, New York, on March 9, 2021. He is survived by his wife of 65 years, Sandra Gould LaFeber, their two children, Scott and Suzanne, and three grandchildren.

Walt earned his B.A. at Hanover College in 1955, his M.A. at Stanford University in 1956, and his Ph.D. at University of Wisconsin in 1959. He joined the faculty of the History Department at Cornell University in 1959 and taught here until he retired in 1999 as the Marie Underhill Noll Professor of American History. The university brought him out of retirement from 2002 to 2006 to teach as the Andrew H. and James S. Tisch Distinguished University Professor.

With Walt’s death, the United States lost one of its preeminent historians. A profound critic of modern American foreign policy, Walt’s work was as provocative as it was widely read and appreciated. He authored or co-authored eleven books, edited four, and published dozens of articles in journals and anthologies. A few of his publications deserve special mention.

Walt’s trajectory began with his first book, the award-winning The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898 (1963), which significantly reinterpreted the advent of U.S. imperialism. Expansion was not thrust upon the United States, Walt wrote, it was planned, and the reasons were not idealist in nature, but economic. Imperialism was meant to solve the domestic crises produced by the Second Industrial Revolution.

Just three years after publishing his first book, Walt produced his second, America, Russia and the Cold War (1966). In it he wrote of the adverse effects of American imperialism at home: the growth of unchecked presidential power and the increased temptation to use military force to solve foreign problems--issues very much with us to this day.

After Walt’s first few decades of teaching at Cornell, he drew upon his experience and made use of his analytical and interpretive skills to reach a general audience in a textbook, The American
Age: U.S. Foreign Policy Abroad and at Home Since 1750 (1989). Despite its sophistication and critical stance, which are by no means common features of textbooks, it was, as one reviewer noted, sprightly, accessible, and full of “color, passion, and lucidity.”

Walt’s studies of American foreign relations led him to probe deeply into the history of more than one region of the world. In his influential 1983 book, *Inevitable Revolutions: The U.S. in Central America*, he argued that the wars in Central America were the inevitable consequence of a system of “neo-dependency” imposed on the region by the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. Republican and Democratic administrations alike had supported right-wing dictators in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and had turned a blind eye to the abuses of oligarchs and their paramilitaries because these political actors helped safeguard U.S. economic, military, and strategic interests in the region. The revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s, then, were not the consequence of Soviet and Cuban meddling, as the Reagan administration argued, but “the class-ridden remains of the Spanish empire turned into the revolution-ridden parts of the North American system.” *Inevitable Revolutions* appealed not only to specialists in U.S. foreign policy and Latin American studies, but also to general readers who wanted to understand the historical context for the Contra war and the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s. The book won the Outstanding Book Award of the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights.

In 1997, Walt once again extended his geographical reach – this time across the Pacific in *The Clash: U.S.-Japan Relations Throughout History*. For this book, Walt used (translated) Japanese sources, and once again provided a strong synthesis of disparate historical materials. The book won the American History Association’s prestigious Bancroft Prize for American History and the Ellis Hawley Prize of the Organization of American Historians. In *The Clash*, as in books throughout his career, Walt showed that trenchant criticism, analytical acuity, archival accuracy, and interpretive sweep could all be made accessible, graceful, lively, and even entertaining.

The last book that Walt published in his prolific career, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (1999), is not his most celebrated work, but *Michael Jordan* may have been his most original and prescient one. It was a “history of capitalism” more than a decade before that became identified as a field. It was an early study of what we now call the “U.S. in the World” rather than diplomatic history or the history of foreign policy. It was a work of sports history, when that was seen as a niche and unprestigious field. It was also a cultural history, at a time when diplomatic history rarely mixed with that emerging approach. All in all, the book marked departures not only in subject matter (sports, celebrity, business history) but also in chronology because it focused on the contemporary period much more than Walt’s previous body of work had done.

In this book, Walt asked important and difficult questions: What are the politics of companies like Nike that brand themselves as promoting a healthy lifestyle, but depend on what some would consider to be unsavory corporate practices? How can we describe the politics of an athlete, like Michael Jordan, who strove during his prime to be studiously apolitical? In what ways does Jordan—and other athletes with big endorsements who try to remain above the fray—qualify as political? In the very recent history of Nike, Walt thought he had glimpsed the future of global capitalism. And the more than two decades since the publication of his book have proven him
In the course of writing these and other books, Walt attracted a large following, and he was recruited to serve as a leader of professional organizations and as a commentator in the media. From 1971 to 1975, he became a member of the U.S. Department of State’s Historical Advisory Committee (serving as the committee’s chair in 1974), and he helped to supervise the publication of the influential series *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS). In 1999, he was elected president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). In addition, he served on scholarly editorial boards, including *Diplomatic History* and the *Political Science Quarterly*; gave lectures at universities around the world; and made a number of appearances on radio and television, including *American Presidencies*, hosted by Walter Cronkite, *American Experience* on PBS, and *End of the Cold War*, on BBC-TV.

While widely influential outside Cornell, Walt was known at Cornell most of all as a teacher. He was renowned for leading lively seminars and giving students close individual supervision, and his most famous class was a lecture course, History of American Foreign Relations. He scheduled this course to meet on Saturdays as well as Tuesdays and Thursdays long after other faculty members at Cornell had ceased to teach on Saturdays. Even though he held the course on this seemingly unpopular day, his enrollments were consistently high – regularly in the hundreds. Some of his students recalled that, ironically, he drew even bigger crowds on Saturdays than on Tuesdays or Thursdays because on Saturdays so many students took their dates and other weekend visitors to see him lecture.

Walt was famous for his dramatic delivery. At the beginning of every lecture he wrote a simple outline on the blackboard, and then he talked nonstop without consulting any notes or prompts of any kind. In the course of lecturing, he never hesitated, groped for words, or slowed down. Students found his rapid pace exhilarating. As one remarked, “You had to be careful never to drop your pencil.” Every time Walt offered this course at the end of the final lecture he received a standing ovation.

At each stage of his career, Walt received recognition for his outstanding teaching. In 1966, when the Clark Teaching Award was introduced in the College of Arts and Sciences, he became its first recipient. In 1976, the year of the bicentennial, when Cornell broke with tradition by having a faculty member rather than the president deliver the commencement address, President Dale Corson invited Walt to give it. In 1994, when the Stephen J. Weiss Presidential Fellowship was created to honor the most outstanding undergraduate teachers throughout the university, Walt was the first to be chosen for this high honor. On September 14, 2001, three days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the one faculty member that President Hunter Rawlings selected to address the crowd of 12,000 who gathered for a vigil on the Arts Quad was Walt. In 2002, when the first Andrew H. and James S. Tisch Distinguished Professorship was introduced as a means of coaxing Cornell’s most outstanding teachers into continuing in the classroom rather than retiring, Walt became the first to hold this prestigious position.

In 2006, when Walt retired from teaching, he gave a farewell lecture as retiring professors often do. But so many of his former students expressed interest in attending that it was scheduled to be held not in a Cornell lecture hall but rather in the American Museum of Natural History in New
York City. And when this location also proved to be too small to accommodate the demand, Walt’s lecture was moved to the Beacon Theater in New York City, where more than 3,000 Cornell graduates packed the house to hear Walt one last time. As their devotion suggests, Walt surely ranks among the most beloved professors at Cornell in his own time and perhaps in all time.

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