The Social Origins of U.S. Imperialism, Or,
Linking Labor With LaFeber

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This essay is an effort to link the concerns of Latin American labor historians with those of historians of labor in the United States. Labor studies in Latin America and the U.S. have developed largely in isolation from one another. Both owe far more to the example set by European labor history than they do to each other. To the extent that communication and cross-fertilization exists among labor historians in the hemisphere, it has generally been a one-way street traveled by Latin Americanists based in the United States. Those of us who find ourselves in the position of living in U.S. society, and earning our living studying Latin American labor, are among the few who know something of the history of labor in both the developed and underdeveloped parts of the hemisphere.

One might think that such expertise could be especially useful in this post-Cold-War era of talk about a "new world order," and growing pressure for what is euphemistically called "free trade" in the hemisphere. Those of us who empathize with labor's democratic** struggle, as most labor historians do, should be thinking about strategies to defend and enhance the gains working people have won in the Americas. In both the U.S. and Latin America those gains have for some time been eroding, a process closely linked to the ideology of neo-liberalism that is currently sweeping the globe. Among its other goals, neo-liberalism is designed to foster even greater mobility of capital than what we have seen in the past. Historically, that mobility (both within nation-states and across national borders) has been the most potent weapon of owners of the means of production in subverting the organization and gains of labor. Workers, in

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**I use the term democratic to refer to greater participation in, and control over, decisions about production, reproduction, and distribution by the majority of people in society.
contrast, have been much more committed to place and community, and, especially since the 1920s, have seen their ability to move across national boundaries ever more constrained by the state.

Designing such a strategy is a tall order, toward which labor historians can contribute only tangentially. Like all the work of historians, our contributions to this urgent political task will be ideological, which does not mean that we can compromise the canons of our discipline or our own intellectual honesty. Quite the contrary: we must endeavor to rethink the history of labor in the Americas in ways that can foster a democratic politics for struggle in the present and at the same time render the past more accurately and more persuasively than rival interpretations that serve the needs of labor's class antagonists.

One way to begin rethinking that history is to apply the experience of working in the field of Latin American history to a critical assessment of the field of U.S. history. Given our methods, this is a rare and risky endeavor for historians. We are trained in the study of a single place and time, usually a national history over a relatively short period of time, and the structure of our discipline—jobs, funding, prestige—is designed to keep us there. As a result, we have virtually abandoned the study of comparative and world history, leaving both in the problematic hands of social scientists. It is true that a fully satisfying history of labor in the Americas ultimately will depend on the work of country specialists. Ideally, it should result from collective efforts that bridge the national ghettos in which we customarily do our most sophisticated yet parochial work. But non-specialists can contribute to this project in important conceptual ways. In what follows I implicitly reveal how much I have learned from historians of U.S. labor. But my explicit purpose is to try to demonstrate how much U.S. labor historians could learn from the perspective and methods of Latin Americanists.

The subject of the essay, the social origins of U.S. imperialism, lends itself to this purpose for two important reasons. First, and most obviously, because the War of 1898 launched the U.S. on an imperialist drive that has had profound implications for all the societies of the Americas, indeed for the world, ever since. Second, because the conceptual and methodological tools of Latin American historians have evolved in significant part as a response to that very expansionism. In recent decades those tools have revolutionized and democratized the study of Latin American history. I will argue that they could contribute to a similar revision of U.S. historical scholarship as well.
The best single study of the origins of U.S. imperialism remains The New Empire (Ithaca, 1963) by U.S. historian Walter LaFeber. Most of the ideas in the book were not new; in fact, most can be found in the seminal work of one of LaFeber's mentors at the University of Wisconsin, William Appleman Williams' The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (Cleveland, 1959). But the sweep of LaFeber's synthesis of these ideas, the tightness of his definition of his subject matter, the striking, although unacknowledged, fidelity of his interpretation to elements of classical social democratic and Marxist theories of imperialism (one reviewer perceptively called the evidence LaFeber presented "astonishingly Hobsonian—if not Leninist"), and, not least, LaFeber's exhaustive research and disciplinary rigor made The New Empire a uniquely powerful, and difficult to dismiss, challenge to mainstream U.S. historiography.

The New Empire is not without weaknesses, however, many of them typical of U.S. historiography in general, and that produced during the era of the Cold War in particular. As alluded to above, it ignores theory, eschewing any effort to place itself in the context of theories of imperialism. It is politically ambiguous. Read superficially, it can be taken as a defense, rather than as a critique, of U.S. expansionism. The ambiguity owes much to the nature of the literature on the subject that preceeded LaFeber's work. It argued that businessmen opposed the War of 1898, and explained the War as an "accident," the result of the failures of a weak President McKinley who was driven to war by a "yellow press" and irresponsible public opinion. As LaFeber resolutely underlines these interpretations, he seems at times to celebrate the intelligence and vision of the expansionists. He shows that the War was the logical result of a consensus built over decades and shared by influential leaders in business, government, religious, and academic circles. All agreed on the vital need to expand markets to preserve unchanged a domestic economic, social, political, and cultural system they believed was gravely threatened by social forces slipping from their control.

The caution with which LaFeber framed his argument and defined his terms in The New Empire reflects the repressive Cold War climate of the times. "I have not used the . . . term [imperialism], since the connotations given to it in the Cold War make it almost meaningless (p. viii)." The same legacy, and LaFeber's determination to demonstrate that the War of 1898 was a conscious product of the nation's leadership, may also help explain his curious need to record his admiration for the imperialists whose thought and actions he analyzed so tellingly:

I found both the policy makers and the businessmen of this era to be responsible, conscientious men who accepted the economic and social realities of their
day, understood domestic and foreign problems, debated issues vigorously, and especially were unafraid to strike out on new and uncharted paths in order to create what they sincerely hoped would be a better nation and a better world (p. ix).

He then concluded his Preface: "All this, however, is not to deny that the decisions of these men resulted in many unfortunate consequences for their twentieth-century descendants (p. ix)."

The climate of the times may also help to explain the focus of his revisions as he worked to reorganize and broaden the dissertation he had completed in 1959, a detailed study in diplomatic history prosaically entitled "The Latin American Policy of the Second Cleveland Administration." He decided to add chapters on economic trends and the thought of elites. He chose not to focus on the social forces that, as his analysis showed so clearly, these elites thought so much about: the popular democratic challenge from farmers and workers that escalated in the late nineteenth century and culminated during the severe depression of the mid 1890's. That this dramatic mobilization of working people was clearly on the mind of LaFeber the graduate student is apparent in the epigram he chose to begin his dissertation. It was a statement by the historian H. Von Holst on the crisis facing the United States following the bloody repression of the great Pullman strike of 1894.

Fearful is the responsibility that rests upon this people, not only for themselves and for their posterity, but for all mankind. Never before have all the conditions been so favorable for making self-government a permanent success; never again can they be so favorable. If we fail now, after what those who preceded us have achieved and left us [as] a priceless heritage, we shall stand in history more deeply branded than any other people, for our guilt will be greater than that of any nation that has ever trod the face of the earth. (5)

That epigram is missing from The New Empire. So also is the clarity with which LaFeber conceptualized the popular social dimension of his argument at the beginning of his dissertation. There he stressed how elite fears of the "danger" and the "threat" posed by the rise of rural and urban radicalism drove policy makers toward an expansionary course (pp. viii-ix).

Nevertheless, the social motor for imperialist expansion is omnipresent in The New Empire. To be sure it rarely appears in its own right. Absent is the history of organizations like the Farmers' Alliance, the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor. Missing are accounts of the massive, bloody strikes of the era—the great railway strike of 1877, Haymarket, Homestead, the tremendous, overlapping national strikes of miners and railway workers in 1894. The radical democratic visions of an
alternative society articulated by farmers and workers during the 1880's and 1890's, their detailed blueprints for fundamental reform or democratic transformation of U.S. society, find no place in LaFeber's treatment. But a phantasmagoric popular social threat pervades the work nonetheless. It appears in twisted form in the perceptions of the businessmen, statesmen, and intellectuals LaFeber continually quotes verbatim. Through the mind of this power elite, LaFeber tellingly establishes the link between their class preoccupations and fears and the chronic economic depressions and popular mobilization that define the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially the decade of the 1890s.

Within these limits, LaFeber's work stands as an extraordinary contribution to U.S. historiography. It outlines the maturation of the U.S. industrial economy during the 25-year cycle of fitful depression that began with the Great Depression of 1873-78 and ended with that of 1893-97. It describes the fate of agricultural exports during the same period, showing the dramatic price decline of major commodities, especially wheat, and the concomitant rise in the value of manufactured exports, which constituted about a third of all exports by the end of the period. That trend, LaFeber argues, coupled with the growing perception that the U.S. economy was producing more than it could consume or place abroad, led to ever wider concurrence about the need for new markets. These would have to be found not primarily in Europe, where competition was fierce, but in Latin America-- and beyond it in Asia--where agricultural staples like wheat, and especially manufactured goods, would find millions of new consumers.

LaFeber links this analysis of the drive for expansion with the psychological impact of the official closing of the western frontier, which was (prematurely) announced by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1890. He is thus able, in one of his most important chapters, to incorporate into his argument the thought of the most famous of U.S. historians, Frederick Jackson Turner. Speaking at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 Turner advanced the most influential interpretation of U.S. history ever developed, the so-called "Frontier Thesis." Turner held that "American" individualism, political institutions, and national character--in a word the country's unique democratic calling--all rested on the economic power generated by expansion across free land on the frontier. Now that the frontier had disappeared, the thesis implied, what would become of these unique American institutions and qualities? Here was the nub of the matter, the idea that the whole "American System" was at risk and that to preserve its expansion was necessary.

But LaFeber is not content to demonstrate the implications of the Turner thesis. He goes on to show that as early as 1891 Turner was aware of the "amazing new cure-all" of "open-door"
expansionism, which would be the hallmark of a new empire, where economic advantage, a new frontier, could be won without the burdens of formal colonialism. In Turner's paper, "The Significance of History," LaFeber found a statement that, as he put it, "offered to historians the Ariadne thread for unraveling American foreign policy after 1890."

[O]nce fully afloat on the sea of worldwide economic interests we shall soon develop political interests. . . .

[P]erhaps most important are our present and future relations with South America, coupled with our Monroe Doctrine. It is a settled maxim of international law that the government of a foreign state whose subjects have lent money to another state may interfere to protect the rights of the bondholders, if they are endangered by the borrowing state.

"It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this statement, LaFeber concluded, "and unnecessary to elaborate upon it (pp. 69-70)."

Implicit in Turner's Frontier Thesis, then, and explicit in the quotations LaFeber martialed from government officials, businessmen, and prominent intellectuals, were the social origins of U.S. expansionism. LaFeber's evidence demonstrated the class fears of economic elites, although the bulk of his analysis focused on the intellectuals, politicians, and diplomats who put such fears into systematic form and provided the blueprint for U.S. expansionism. He collected evidence from scores of business journals and literary magazines and newspapers big and small. He analyzed the writings of Alfred Mahan, Brooks Adams, and Josiah Strong. He probed the diplomatic records of a string of powerful secretaries of state including Blaine, Gresham, and Olney to show how market advantage became the single overriding goal of U.S. foreign policy in the late nineteenth century.

This first part of the book, most of it added after completion of the dissertation, establishes these broad economic, intellectual, and strategic developments. Most of the rest of the book (the original dissertation itself) is devoted to case studies of U.S. policy in Latin America during the 1890s. LaFeber focuses on policy toward the Chilean Revolution of 1891, the Brazilian Revolution of 1894, the Venezuelan Boundary Crisis of 1895-96, and finally, the Cuban crisis that led the United States into war with Spain in 1898. This diplomatic history is not very attractive to Latin American historians because it neglects entirely Latin American sources and fails to analyze adequately the internal Latin American dimensions of the events LaFeber describes. But for LaFeber's purposes these case studies work admirably, if a little monotonously, to hammer home his thesis that U.S. policy consciously, consistently, ruthlessly sought markets, markets, markets. For LaFeber, then, 1898, the advent of a formal policy of imperialism, was simply the logical result, the foregone conclusion, of a process that brought U.S.
business, policy, and academic leaders to a consensus about how best to preserve the social status quo.

II

The New Empire was so impressive as a piece of historical research and writing that the American Historical Association awarded it the prestigious Beveridge Prize and funded its publication in 1963. Yet for all its apparent eminence among U.S. historians, The New Empire's interpretation of the origins of U.S. imperialism has not become the dominant one in the literature, a fact revealed in the treatment of that subject in mainstream U.S. history textbooks today. I inspected three such works, which I believe are representative of the field: George Brown Tindall, America: A Narrative History (New York, 1984; references below are to the second edition, 1988), Robert A. Devine, T. H. Breen, George M. Frederickson, and R. Hal Williams, America: Past and Present (Glenview, Illinois, 1984), and Mary Beth Norton, David Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, and William M. Tuttle, Jr., A People and a Nation: A History of the United States (Boston, 1986; references are to the second edition, no date).

These works are all squarely in the liberal mainstream of U.S. historical scholarship, yet they represent a certain range of approach and interpretation within that tradition. Tindall's is the most traditional in approach--it is basically narrative political history--and is also the most conservative politically of the three. For example, it treats nineteenth-century labor developments under the heading "Advances for Labor," and on the causes of the War of 1898 emphasizes the pre-LaFeber conclusion that the "ultimate blame for the war, if blame must be levied, belongs to the American people for letting themselves be whipped up into such a hostile frenzy" (p. 914).

The second text, America: Past and Present, is, in the words of its authors, "a blend of the traditional and the new." It combines traditional political narrative with an emphasis on how events affected concrete individuals chosen to represent what the authors call "ordinary citizens." It continually stresses the positive: the post Civil War building of an "incredibly productive economic system," the attempts "to infuse the industrial order with social justice" in the early twentieth century, the "resiliency" of the "maturing American order," which was "tested" by the Great Depression, and so on. (The otherwise complete description of coverage in the Preface conveniently ignores the period immediately after 1898, which even most liberal historians call imperial.) The book devotes considerable attention to minorities, especially African Americans, and to women. Its section on the War of 1898, for example, emphasizes the gallantry of the black soldiers who may have carried the day.
at the pivotal battle of San Juan Hill and stresses the racial prejudice these troops experienced at the hands of their countrymen.

A similar approach is manifest in the third text, the only one to use in its title the term "United States," rather than the inaccurate, and, to a Latin Americanist's ears, ethnocentric noun "America," to refer to this country. Influenced by the concerns of the new social history, A People and a Nation weaves attention to "ordinary" individuals (including "the factory worker, the slave, the office secretary, the local merchant, the small farmer") into a traditional political narrative. Also like the previous text, it empathizes with victims of exploitation and prejudice, especially women and ethnic minorities. Of the three texts, whose differences should not be exaggerated since they share a common liberal faith in the democratic progress of the nation, A People and a Nation adopts the most critical and least optimistic view of the march of U.S. history. This is a subtle quality subtly illustrated in the chapter titles each gives to the story of the rise of U.S. imperialism. For Tindall it is the "Course of Empire," for Devine and company it is "Toward Empire," but for Norton et al it is the "Quest for Empire."

All three of these texts cite The New Empire in their suggestions for further reading. And all, in one sense, incorporate the book's analysis, noting, in the chapters cited above, the search for markets in the diplomatic process that develops over decades and culminates in the War of 1898. In the most critical sense, however, none of these works fully comes to terms with LaFeber's argument, which, as outlined above, places U.S. expansionism explicitly within the context of economic developments, especially the chronic depressions of the late nineteenth century, and implicitly, by treating the class preoccupations of elites, in the context of popular social mobilization.

It is not that economic issues, and labor and agrarian unrest, are not treated in these texts. Consistent with their comprehensive nature there is considerable detail and useful analysis of each of these subjects. But these themes are treated in other chapters and are thus effectively delinked from the story of the origins of U.S. imperialism. Urban labor's story is recounted in chapters dealing with the rise of industry. Separated from labor's story, and usually treated in chapters dealing with the debate over the currency and the tariff, is the history of agrarian unrest and Populist mobilization. Finally, none of the texts deals with the link established by LaFeber between U.S. expansion and intellectual trends, particularly his searching analysis of the relationship between the most celebrated interpretation of U.S. history, the Turner Thesis, and the imperial thrust of 1898.
That the authors of mainstream liberal textbooks do not come to terms fully with LaFeber's contribution is disconcerting. After all, their professional task is to provide college readers with a fair-minded synthesis of the best historical scholarship in the field of U.S. history. Yet it is not surprising. To incorporate LaFeber's thesis fully would undermine not only the ideological and political message of these texts, but the very conceptual framework and periodization scheme that structures them, and mainstream U.S. historiography generally. To accept LaFeber's full argument would make the launching of the "new empire," 1898, the great watershed of post-Civil-War U.S. history.

More disconcerting, however, and much more surprising, is the parallel failure of major recent contributions to U.S. agrarian and labor history to come to terms with LaFeber and the origins of U.S. imperialism. Doubly disconcerting, one might say, because these works, reflecting the greater pluralism in U.S. historiography since the days when a brave young Walter LaFeber wrote The New Empire, depart from mainstream liberal traditions and work from radical or explicitly Marxist assumptions. Three such works, each dealing with a central facet of our story, are considered here. Lawrence Goodwyn's Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America (New York, 1976), David Montgomery's Workers' Control in America (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), and David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, Segmented Work, Divided Workers (Cambridge, Eng., 1982). The first two were written by historians and are widely acknowledged as major contributions to U.S. social history. The third, written by social scientists, advances a framework for nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. economic and labor history that provides important conceptual tools for analyzing the social origins of U.S. imperialism. That it does so is ironic, however, because like Goodwyn's and Montgomery's books, Gordon et al's study totally ignores LaFeber's achievement and fails to address the imperialist corollary of its own revisionist argument.

Goodwyn's book is a major reinterpretation of the greatest mass movement in U.S. history. It challenges both the classic study of Populism by John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt (1931), which saw in the movement a harbinger of twentieth-century liberal reform, and Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform (1955), which casts it as a reactionary force. Goodwyn demonstrates the movement's cooperative ethos, its radical, anti-systemic program, its democratic potential. Reading this book one can well appreciate how LaFeber's elites must have shuddered at the prospect of growing Populist power. Goodwyn's greatest achievement is to show how the movement, bound together by a cooperative democratic culture, united millions of rural workers across ethnic, regional, political, and—not least important—
class or property divisions. The Farmer's Alliances brought together rural smallholders, sharecroppers, and day laborers with railroad and even some urban workers, whites with blacks, Southerners with Westerners, and one-time Democrats with former Republicans in a radical civil crusade against the power of the railroads, the banks, the merchants, and the political system itself. Yet Goodwyn, who empathizes profoundly with the Populists, and sees in their movement important lessons for those who would construct a democratic politics in the nation today, fails to address the links between the radical agrarian mobilization he celebrates and the resolution of the national crisis it created through imperialism. Veteran Populist Tom Watson, who helped lead the powerful bi-racial agrarian movement in the south and served as the Populists' vice-presidential candidate in 1896, grasped this link very clearly. "The Spanish War finished us," Watson would later say. "The blare of the bugle drowned the voice of the Reformer."(6) Goodwyn, on the other hand, is silent on the issue of imperialism and fails to acknowledge LaFeber in his bibliography.

David Montgomery's seminal book eloquently demonstrates the transcendence of the struggle of U.S. workers to exert control over the labor process in U.S. industry. That struggle is a touchstone of the violent labor conflict of the 1880s and 1890s, and, according to Montgomery, forms the leitmotif of U.S. industrial conflict until the middle of the present century. Montgomery also sensitively documents the ethos of mutuality pervading the U.S. labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century, a quality that proved explosive when translated into the sympathy strikes that were the hallmark of the 1890's. Montgomery thus provides rich historical evidence to support the philosophical Marxist understanding of the degradation of work under monopoly capitalism advanced by Harry Braverman in his study of the process of de-skilling long associated with the scientific management doctrines of Frederick Taylor.(7) Montgomery, however, like Goodwyn, totally ignores the link between his story and the origins of U.S. expansionism.

The third book, a collaborative study by three Marxist economists, sets out to link stages in the evolution of the U.S. economy, from the beginnings of industrialization in the early nineteenth century to the present, with parallel developments in labor markets and the labor process. Of particular interest to the authors is the connection between the famous long waves of capitalist expansion in the world economy, roughly fifty-year periods of growth and contraction, and what they call "structures of accumulation" within these waves. By that term they mean the conditions, broadly conceived, under which capitalists are induced to invest and thus expand production during long periods of time, according to long wave theory, roughly twenty-five year periods. Structures of accumulation thus include banking and currency laws, government financial policies and institutions,
and, most importantly, forms of the labor process and of worker organization and resistance. A major section of the book treats the twenty-five year period of downturn in the long wave that coincides with the maturation of the U.S. industrial economy and the massive worker protest and organizational drives of the 1870s, 1880s and 1980s. This is the period of chronic depressions between 1873 and 1898 that forms the conceptual foundation of LaFeber's argument, helps explain the agrarian mobilization described by Goodwyn, and fosters the explosive labor protest analyzed by Montgomery.

Gordon, Edwards, and Reich define this period as one of economic crisis and uncertainty, in which workers and capitalists struggle to create new institutional and organizational forms able to turn the crisis to their class advantage. Best known among the initiatives by capitalists is the concentration of capital into huge oligopolies known in the U.S. as trusts. This process, identified and documented by Lenin, occurred throughout the industrialized world and led, according to his influential theory of imperialism, to a massive export of capital to lesser developed regions, the scramble for colonies, and ultimately, to war between blocs of capitalist nations for a redivision of influence and territory worldwide. Gordon et al note this process of economic concentration but focus their analysis on the concerted effort by capitalists to lower labor costs and increase production by breaking the control of skilled workers over the labor process.

Gordon et al search through the history books for evidence to document this theoretical model of economic change, but they fail to see how the struggle they define could help to explain some of the major questions in the labor history of this period. It could help explain, for example, the enigma in the literature surrounding the meteoric rise and decline of the Knights of Labor, which organized millions of skilled and unskilled workers in a common vision of a democratic society of producers in the 1880s. It could further understanding of the causes of the violent resistance by workers to efforts by management to restructure production in industries like steel, such as the Homestead Strike of 1892. It could place in theoretical context the emergence of such innovative labor initiatives as the sympathy strike, documented in studies like Montgomery's. All of these organizational and tactical initiatives by labor met with severe public and private repression, and with effective counter strategies by capitalists and the state, such as the use of court injunctions against sympathy strikes. Faced with this repressive reality, many skilled workers turned toward a more moderate and restricted unionism, embodied in the American Federation of Labor, whose star began to rise in the 1890s.

Gordon et al's framework has much to offer students of agrarian unrest as well. It helps to conceptualize the period of U.S. and world deflation during the quarter century after 1873.
It can help link theoretically the debate over the tariff and the currency and explain the central role the Populists play in those struggles.

Strange as it may seem, however, the issue of foreign expansion does not enter into Gordon et al.'s discussion of the forging of a new structure of accumulation during the late nineteenth century. The word imperialism does not figure in the index; LaFeber is absent from the bibliography. Yet the imperialist thrust of 1898 coincides with the end of a quarter century of economic uncertainty and the beginning of the next long wave of global capitalist expansion, which in the U.S. will feature a great burst of investment in Latin America, the separation of Panama, the building of the canal, and the beginnings of the consolidation of an informal U.S. colonialism over the whole of Latin American in this century. It coincides, in a word, with the advent of LaFeber's new empire, one controlled through informal economic and political mechanisms not (for the most part) through the formal acquisition of colonies.

IV

How is one to explain the seemingly ever greater reluctance of U.S. scholars to recognize the social origins of U.S. imperialism? And what are the intellectual and political implications of taking what would seem to be, to a Latin Americanist at least, such a simple, logical step?

One might argue that to do so is ahistorical, that the democratic social threat to the system was not so great or radical, or that it had crested or had been resolved by the mid-1890s, and that hindsight proves such is the case. This would probably be the gambit taken by the authors of the liberal textbooks I have described. But it misses the point. However one weighs the scope, intensity, and timing of popular mobilization by rural and urban workers—qualities that the recent scholarship by Goodwyn and Montgomery clearly tends to weigh more heavily on the side of real threat than much earlier work—the issue under consideration is the perception of that threat by privileged social sectors. LaFeber persuasively documents those perceptions of threat. To come to terms with his work, and evidence from the recent scholarship on worker mobilization that can buttress and extend LaFeber's argument, historians must heed refute LaFeber's analysis of such perceptions, and explain away, somehow, the links he establishes between elite class perceptions and imperialist action.

As for that recent scholarship itself, which, as I have noted, is built on radical or Marxist not liberal assumptions, it might be argued that for Goodwyn and Montgomery social struggle, not imperialist expansion, is their subject matter. The problem here is that the issue of imperialism is intertwined with their...
story, including its outcome.

For all its militancy and growing organizational strength during the first two decades of this century, the U.S. labor movement fell apart in the 1920s. David Montgomery set out to explain this outcome in a second book, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987). Like *Workers' Control*, whose themes and research it incorporates, *The Fall* treats the growing power of labor in the 1890s and the first two decades of this century, and its collapse in the 1920s, without mentioning the impact of imperialism. Nor does it deal systematically with the implications for labor of the tremendous expansion of U.S. industry during the first two decades of this century, a trend that coincides with foreign expansionism. What does this dual process mean in terms of the long-term amelioration of "hard times," rising real wages and consumption, increasing labor militancy and organizational success? What does it mean in terms of working- and middle-class attitudes toward darker, underdeveloped peoples, toward the nation, toward the system of capitalism itself? Readers interested in how the advent of imperialism and the rapid expansion of the economy affect Montgomery's themes of massive foreign immigration and ethnic divisions in the labor movement, the failure of socialists to capture the American Federation of Labor, the growing, and finally repressive, role of the state will be disappointed.

One student of U.S. labor history who does address the issue of imperialism is Phillip Foner. Foner has made a major contribution to the study of the origins of the War of 1898 that stresses the racial and class fears of U.S. policy makers contemplating the increasingly radical nature of the Cuban independence movement (*The Spanish–Cuban–American War and the Birth of American Imperialism* [2 vols., New York, 1972]). He has also edited, with Richard C. Winchester, *The Anti-Imperialist Reader* (New York, 1984), whose first volume covers the period from the Mexican War to the election of 1900 and includes responses of organized labor, socialist leaders, and African Americans to U.S. imperialism. And he has recently published the first volume of his study, *U.S. Labor Movement and Latin America* (South Hadley, Mass., 1988), which demonstrates how shallow and opportunistic was the stance on imperialism taken by most sectors of the U.S. labor movement after 1898. Although Foner is aware of LaFeber's book, and of its place in an evolving literature on the origins of imperial expansion, he interprets its thesis in the same way the liberal textbooks do. He focuses entirely on the quest for markets and neglects entirely LaFeber's implicit argument: that the democratic struggle of U.S. rural and urban workers impels the national elite into their imperialist adventure.

Foner's unwillingness to acknowledge the social dimensions of LaFeber's argument has its roots in his Leninist understanding
of imperialism. His work measures the responses of labor organizations to the advent of U.S. imperialism against a standard of "true" class consciousness. Needless to say, he finds most of these responses clearly wanting, the products of proletarian "false consciousness." Acknowledgement of the Origins of U.S. imperialism in the democratic struggles of U.S. workers demands fundamental revision of Lenin's theory of imperialism and complicates his indictment of the "labor aristocracy" of advanced industrial nations. These are theoretical and political tasks that Foner and most orthodox Marxists in the U.S. and abroad have yet to undertake. (9)

In Gordon et al's case, it can be argued that by ignoring imperialism they miss the glue that cements all the separate pieces fashioned during the crisis of the last decades of the nineteenth century into a new structure of accumulation. These pieces include features as central as the organization of new, concentrated forms of production and new, more conservative, forms of labor organization, the key capitalist advance in the structuring of the labor process known as Taylorism, the victory of advocates of the gold standard and a high protective tariff, the building of a battleship navy to protect overseas commerce and imperial beachheads, the consolidation of Republican political hegemony, and the denaturing, through fusion with the Democratic party, and the eventual defeat, of the Populists' third Party. The national euphoria accompanying the "splendid little" War of 1898, and the acquisition of the strategic territory to protect the canal that will open up Latin American market, help unify the national market, and open the way to Asia, appear in this reading as the last and crowning pieces in the puzzle of accumulation--except for the fact that, like much of the foregoing, they do not figure in Gordon, Edwards, and Reich's analysis.

Given the failure of important works like these to link the dramatic mobilization of U.S. workers of the 1890s to the issue of U.S. expansion, it is not surprising that a new radical textbook, which emphasizes the role of working people in U.S. history, suffers from the same grave defect. Inspired by Herbert Gutman, Who Built America? (2 vols., New York, 1992; references below are to the second volume) seeks to synthesize the "dramatic discoveries" about working people contained in the new social history of the last three decades. These discoveries, the authors announce in their introduction, allow them "to think and write differently about familiar topics, including the rise of industrial capitalism, U.S. overseas expansion [italics mine], successive waves of internal migration and foreign immigration to the nation's cities, depression and war, the rise of industrial unionism, and the widening struggle for civil rights (pp. ix-x)."

But the way they set up their treatment of the late nineteenth century, the authors give the impression that labor
protest of the 1880s and 1890s (during the so-called "Gilded Age") leads only to domestic reform (the "Progressive Era"). Imperialism is left out of the equation (see the last paragraph on p. 4). Yet the authors recognize that the end of the 1890s was a watershed in the history of U.S. labor. Summarizing their Chapter 4, on the "class war" of the 1880s and 1890s, they declare that the U.S. "would never again witness such a broad or fundamental challenge by working people to the claims of capital (p. 157)." But they neither link U.S. expansionism to worker protest of the 1890s nor to labor's more moderate twentieth-century course. Rather, U.S. expansion enters their study in the following chapter, which covers the period 1900 to the start of World War I. There it is treated in the conventional manner of the mainstream textbooks reviewed above. U.S. expansionism is "[d]riven, in many ways, by economic needs," that is, the search for markets, and by the "example" of European powers. The labor struggles of the 1890s enter their analysis only indirectly, as a spur to a "strident nationalism," voiced by "politicians and religious leaders (pp. 161-62)." Neither The New Empire, nor, for that matter, the works by Foner on U.S. imperialism discussed above, figure in their extensive bibliographies for these two chapters. A final indicator of their disregard for the importance of U.S. imperialism and expansion is the index itself, where neither term appears.

The point is not to denigrate the otherwise admirable accomplishments of this fine new textbook. Its authors go a long way toward placing the experience and struggles of working people at the center of U.S. history, where they belong. Particularly notable is their use of illustrations and the direct testimony of working people to convey the texture of daily life and evoke the drama of public events. But their failure to link the domestic and international dimensions of the struggle of U.S. workers during the 1890s distorts the history of the era and impoverishes the intellectual and political significance of their argument. The authors could have developed that link at many different points in their narrative, but one passage in particular illustrates the limits of their vision and the interpretive promise of the alternative advocated here.

The authors rightly stress the central role of Attorney General Richard Olney during the dramatic labor conflicts of 1894. After describing the terrible fate of Jacob Coxey's march on Washington at the head of an "industrial army" of the unemployed in May of that year, and noting the existence of larger, more radical armies in the west, which sometimes seized trains, they turn to Olney, a former railroad corporation lawyer, who "played a particularly important role in shaping administration policy." "Olney obtained federal court injunctions, deployed large numbers of U.S. marshals, and finally brought in U.S. troops to end the train seizures." These measures led to considerable conflict but in the end they stopped
the train hijackings and, "more important, halted the eastward march of the industrial armies (p. 140)." By mid summer, however, with tens of thousands of coal miners already on strike, Eugene V. Debs' powerful new American Railway Union launched a nationwide boycott in support of striking workers at the Pullman car works that brought most of the nation's railway traffic to a halt. Olney now enters their narrative a second time.

Attorney General Olney, building on the tactics he used earlier against Coxey's Army, obtained a sweeping injunction in early July from the federal courts, effectively outlawing the boycott.

Federal troops and state militia were quickly dispatched in six states. The arrival of the U.S. Army in Chicago on the Fourth of July precipitated a violent confrontation that left thirteen dead, more than fifty wounded, and hundreds of thousands of dollars of railroad property destroyed. Working-class resistance to the troops spread rapidly across the country over the course of the next week, encompassing twenty-six states in all from Maine to California. By July 11, an estimated thirty-four people were killed; Debs and other ARU leaders were arrested (p. 142).

The authors go on to analyze the weak support given the ARU by the leadership of the AFL, and the bitter aftermath of the strike, which led to prison terms for Debs and other leaders and the blacklisting of many of the strikers.

Now, although the authors of *Who Built America?* do not give us this information, this is the same Richard Olney who just one year later, as Secretary of State, issued a famous pronouncement that put the world on notice of U.S. intentions to play a forceful new role in the hemisphere and the world of power politics. "Today," he declared in blustering legal diction, "the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition."

The immediate intent of Olney's declaration was to thwart British designs on territory claimed by Venezuela. But the broader legacy of his pronouncement, widely recognized by students of U.S. diplomatic history, was the way it transformed the Monroe Doctrine into a "positive" instrument, which after 1895 increasingly was used to justify the right of the U.S. to intervene in the affairs of Latin American nations when it felt its interests were threatened.

In *The New Empire*, LaFeber stresses the relationship of Olney's "epochal" pronouncement to both economic and social issues at home and imperial expansion abroad. He begins his coverage of Olney, like the authors of *Who Built America?*, noting that before he accepted the post of attorney general in 1892 he was one of the "best-paid" railroad lawyers in New England. But then LaFeber enters more complex terrain. In order to understand U.S. actions in the boundary dispute in 1895, he contends, two
aspects of Olney's thought must be understood. First, Olney had changed his views concerning the cause of the depression during the course of 1893 and 1894. In 1893 he attributed the depression to a normal downturn of the business cycle. By June, 1894, however, his understanding of the economic picture had matured to the point where he interpreted the depression as a great "labor revolution" resulting from the introduction of machine technology into the economy (p. 256; LaFeber documents this change through close inspection of Olney's public utterances and private letterbooks). LaFeber says that Olney hoped this "revolution" could be channeled in peaceful ways, but he reminds us that as Attorney General he did not hesitate to use force in the Pullman strike and that he regarded Eugene Debs with contempt.

The second crucial aspect of Olney's thought, according to LaFeber, was his understanding of the course of U.S. history. He believed by 1895 that the U.S. had emerged from the period of internal development and was "by necessity expanding outward (256)." The significance of the Venezuelan boundary issue thus begins to become clear in LaFeber's analysis. In challenging Great Britain's pretension to control, at Venezuela's expense, the mouth of the Orinoco River, which many in the Cleveland administration believed was the gateway to the commerce of northeastern South America, Olney was escalating the policy of commercial expansion that culminated in the War of 1898. In enunciating the "Olney extension" of the Monroe Doctrine in 1895, the Cleveland administration was saying, as LaFeber puts it bluntly, "that the Western Hemisphere was to be under American [U.S.] commercial and political control, not European (p. 242)."

In ignoring Olney the diplomat, the authors of Who Built America? artificially split the man, and the history they write, in two. The pair of ideas outlined by LaFeber coexisted and complemented each other in Olney's mind. They inform his innovative, aggressive interpretations of both domestic and international law. They link his relentless repression of the Pullman strike in 1894 and his forceful diplomacy of 1895. Perhaps the thought and actions of no other single historical figure testify so powerfully to the social origins of U.S. imperialism.

So the question remains. How is one to explain the reluctance to come to terms with the social origins of U.S. imperialism that seems to compromise so fully the work of U.S. historians, liberal, Marxist, and radical alike? Why, in other words, does no one link labor and LaFeber?

Such reluctance cannot fully be explained as a product of a self-serving, uncritical nationalism. Nor can explanation rest
entirely on an appreciation of the power of liberal assumptions in U.S. thought, or on what Appleman Williams, late in his career, mordantly called "empire as a way of life." (11) To be sure, nationalist and liberal assumptions lie at the heart of the story. They are obvious in the treatment of the late nineteenth century in the mainstream textbooks, including those that incorporate progressive variants of liberal thought sanctioned in recent decades in response to pressures exerted by ethnic minorities and women. Judging from these textbooks, what cannot be sanctioned in the liberal tradition is the idea that history is the history of class struggle.

More subtle, and for that reason much more telling, are the insidious ways the liberal tradition distorts treatment of the origins of U.S. imperialism in the radical and Marxist contributions we have been examining. Nowhere is this process more revealing than in LaFeber's work itself. As we have seen, the traditional liberal explanations with which LaFeber had to contend ultimately blamed the people of the U.S. for the War of 1898. LaFeber, in contrast, was determined to place the blame where it really lay, in the hands of the power elite. But in accomplishing that goal so single-mindedly, he neglected two other essential and related tasks. He failed, as stressed earlier, to develop the role of worker mobilization in bringing the elite to consciousness about the need for expansion. And he failed to see how the evidence of popular support for the War, on which the traditional interpretations rested their case, had within it a democratic core. Did not most people who devoured the stories of Spanish atrocities in the "yellow press" and favored U.S. intervention in Cuba sympathize with the Cuban revolutionaries and want to aid in their struggle to liberate themselves from colonial oppression? Had LaFeber devoted a modicum of attention to the last theme, he could have accomplished his revisionist goal more effectively, by subsuming the rival liberal interpretation and enlisting it in his argument. Had he fully incorporated the first theme, he could have eliminated the political ambiguity in his analysis and produced a full-blown democratic history of the origins of U.S. imperialism.

The measure of LaFeber's accomplishment lies not in his neglect of these complementary themes, however, but in the failures of subsequent radical and Marxist students of the labor history of the same period. They fail to recognize LaFeber's accomplishment. And they fail to come to terms with the origins of U.S. imperialism, and the social conflict that helped generate it, on their own. To understand how that could happen, it may be helpful to broaden the discussion of liberal assumptions in U.S. academic discourse by returning to the themes sketched at the start of this essay. Examining the way Latin Americanists have learned to look at the history of the Americas will highlight the different perspectives and methods of their counterparts in the
First of all, few Latin Americanists would fail to see the centrality of the advent of U.S. imperialism to the history of the twentieth century. The War of 1898 and the long wave of capitalist expansion led by the U.S. economy that followed it transformed economic, social, and political life in Latin America. These same developments nurtured a revolution in the way Latin American scholars understood their history. They began by questioning the universal validity of the liberal assumptions that rationalized and justified capitalist expansion. They found inspiration in Marxist critiques of capitalism and imperialism. Finally, they developed their own interpretations of the history of the modern world, which privilege the role of colonialism and imperialism in explaining the interconnected processes of development and underdevelopment. This perspective leads students of labor to emphasize the legacies of free versus coerced labor in explaining the relative vitality of capitalist development in the different parts of the hemisphere. It has also forced some to challenge the dichotomy, fundamental to both the liberal and Marxist paradigms, that separates rural from urban labor. In the Latin American agricultural and mineral export economies that flourished in the context of European and U.S. expansionism, that distinction loses much of its meaning.

Second, Latin Americanists not only study an underdeveloped region, they work for that very reason in an underdeveloped field of history. For all its disadvantages, however, underdevelopment has as its corollary distinct analytical advantages. One is a relative ability to frame research holistically. Because of the limited secondary literature in their field, Latin Americanists can gain familiarity with the whole range of historical inquiry on their subject and incorporate work by social scientists and humanists as well. This comprehensive perspective is of particular importance to labor historians, who can use it to see the centrality of their subject to the larger process of national and global development. (12)

That each of these strengths involves a corresponding weakness should be obvious. Explaining Latin American history as solely a function of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism distorts that history as much as writing European or U.S. history as though colonialism and imperialism did not exist. Doing interdisciplinary, holistic work at the expense of specialized research can be as limiting as the practice of producing sophisticated monographs that nobody puts into national and global context. It is precisely because of these tradeoffs that dialogue between historians of the developed and underdeveloped worlds is so important.

The perspective and methods of Latin Americanists place the pervasiveness of the liberal tradition in U.S. historical
scholarship in sharper relief. They help explain through contrast the ease with which even radical and Marxist labor historians dismiss the importance of the issue of imperialism. They also point to the way specialization can reinforce that tendency, a dynamic illustrated most clearly in the cases of Montgomery and Goodwyn. Both are highly specialized social historians whose works, for all their strengths, rarely transcend the confines of the primary subject matter. Since they define their subjects as either rural (Goodwyn) or urban (Montgomery), neither sees the unity of the social threat perceived in the minds of LaFeber's power holders.

It should also be clear by now how compatible LaFeber's The New Empire is with the way Latin Americanists approach their work. LaFeber's subject matter, his conceptual framework (which mirrors Marxist more than it does liberal assumptions), his holistic approach to research and analysis, and his specific interpretation itself all parallel the ways Latin Americanists tend to approach historical scholarship. But unlike work in Latin American history, LaFeber's book challenges U.S. historians directly, urging them to confront the issue of expansionism, arguing for fundamental revision of their periodization of U.S. history, demonstrating the power of analysis that cuts across economic, intellectual, and diplomatic specialties.

When LaFeber wrote his prefatory warning in 1963 about the "many unfortunate consequences" of the advent of the "new empire" for the people of the twentieth-century U.S., he did not have in mind the current state of U.S. labor studies. He must have hoped, however, that his study would influence a generation of historians, including students of the working people who, his analysis showed, played a central role in the genesis of U.S. expansionism in the 1890s. Although The New Empire has clearly not had that effect, LaFeber has continued to argue for the kind of history he achieved in that study. In his contribution to a recent state-of-the-art volume commissioned by the American Historical Association (Eric Foner, ed., The New American History) he contends that diplomatic history, properly crafted, analyzes the relationships not only between nations but between peoples within those nations that shape their foreign policies. It moves across both national boundaries and scholarly disciplines . . . to attain a central goal: to discover and explain the power that determines those inter- and intranational relationships in a world increasingly interdependent (p. 272).

One can argue, however, with equal or greater force, that labor history should occupy that privileged position. Labor history studies the working majority in society whose democratic struggles are the motor behind capitalist development and expansion. Understanding their struggle places the domestic and international power relations LaFeber refers to in striking
relief. But the point of writing such history is not simply to describe and explain how those power relationships came about, which seems to be the goal LaFeber sets for himself. It is to change them by democratizing them. And for that task organizations of working people remain the best hope. How far students of U.S. labor history are from realizing even the first goal, however, is apparent in the same AHA volume, in the contribution by labor historian Leon Fink. The distance is revealed particularly in his synthesis of recent work on "The Gilded Age and the Progressive Era" (pp. 240-243), which mentions neither expansion nor imperialism, nor any other link between international and domestic affairs.

VI

The intellectual and political implications of this critique of the failure by U.S. historians to recognize the social origins of U.S. imperialism can now be briefly sketched. The primary concern here is not with the authors of the mainstream liberal textbooks, whose pro-systemic purpose is transparent, but rather with the radical and Marxist scholars, whose important contributions to U.S. labor history have been the focus of this discussion. By ignoring the origins in popular democratic struggle of U.S. imperialism they empower not workers but their class antagonists. They thus belittle, underestimate, and distort the very social forces that they all hope can lead toward a more democratic future. They also fail to come to terms with the very institution, imperialism, that will work most of the time in the twentieth century to strengthen labor's class antagonists and weaken labor's own democratic vocation, including its solidarity with democratic forces abroad.

The era I have surveyed, and its dynamics, are similar in many respects to the period of crisis and intense class conflict that led to the wave of U.S. expansionism of our own time. Out of the period defined by the Great Depression of this century and the remarkable labor mobilization of the decade after 1935 came a structure of accumulation initially much more favorable to labor in this country than the one cemented into place after 1898. The hallmark of capitalists' response to labor mobilization at the end of the nineteenth century was a "new imperialism," which sought markets and promoted investments in utilities, transportation, and production of raw materials abroad. In the period since World War II, those activities have continued, but the primary vehicle through which U.S. capitalists have subverted the compromise with a powerful labor movement at home has been the multinational manufacturing corporation. Working people in the U.S. are now becoming painfully aware of the negative consequences of that strategy for labor organization in this country, for the U.S. economy, and for democratic reform of U.S. society generally. Until we recognize that the movement of capital in the world economy owes much of its impetus to the
The democratic struggle of working people—not only the era discussed in this essay but in the contemporary period as well—it is hard to see how we can build the coalitions at home, in the hemisphere, and the world capable of controlling, democratizing, and transforming capitalism.

LaFeber's great book contains within in it the rudiments of a democratic history of imperialism. It diverges from Lenin's classic treatment of the subject in fundamental ways, but most significantly in the manner in which it conceptualizes the role of popular struggle in the industrial core of the capitalist world economy. Lenin's imperialism is ultimately economistic. It empowers impersonal economic forces and capitalists as a class. It demeans the democratic struggles of workers in the industrial core of the world system, confusing the results of labor's defeats and the conservative outcomes of compromises between capital and labor at one stage of struggle with the nature and power of labor's democratic vocation itself. Out of that confusion came the rationale for vanguardism, with its sorry sequel of authoritarianism in the workplace and the polity in the socialist experiments of this century.

Students of the Latin American object of U.S. imperialism are able to see the democratic wellsprings of that process more clearly, I believe, than our brother and sister academicians who study labor in the U.S. itself. Sharing our perspectives can do more than help build a more accurate and democratic understanding of the origins of U.S. imperialism. It can contribute to democratic resolution of the current offensive of capitalists in this nation, the hemisphere, and the world.

ENDNOTES

1. Unfortunately, Latin Americanists are more familiar with LaFeber's other major book dealing with the U.S. and Latin America, Inevitable Revolutions (New York, 1983) than they are with The New Empire. Yet in terms of conceptual and analytical power, and scope and quality of research, The New Empire stands head and shoulders over the other book, whose reputation depends more on the contemporary importance of its subject matter, the crisis in Central America, than it does on the quality of its scholarship. It also appears that a recent generation of U.S. scholars, especially social historians, are more likely to know Inevitable Revolutions than they are The New Empire. For example, Inevitable Revolutions, with its twentieth-century problematic, not The New Empire, is cited in the sources for the late nineteenth century in a new labor-centered textbook in U.S. history, Who Built America? (New York, 1992), Vol II., p. 680. That book and its sources are discussed in detail below.

2. LaFeber frankly acknowledges his debt to Williams and other colleagues at Wisconsin in a declaration that appears at the end
of the book. "I would not care to acknowledge publicly all the ideas which I have stolen from them (p. 428)." Yet LeFeber's book distinguished itself from Williams' work in several important respects. It focused exclusively on the late nineteenth century, the period that culminated in the War of 1898, while Williams developed a more inclusive interpretation of U.S. expansionism that sought to explain in essence the whole independent history of the U.S. Like Hobson and Lenin, LeFeber tied his explanation systematically to economic factors, seeing the drive for foreign markets as the diplomatic analogue of the maturation of U.S. industry. Williams, while not ignoring that issue, focused more on the history of the idea of expansion, which informed the whole national experience. While LeFeber was almost compulsive in his drive to document his argument exhaustively, Williams was characteristically more relaxed about the professional canons of the discipline, an attitude he explains too cavalierly in his Contours of American History (Cleveland, 1961), a book which, like The Tragedy, is not footnoted. "Both footnotes and a full bibliography for a book of this nature would be poor jokes upon everyone concerned." "The source of a single quotation means almost nothing unless the entire context of associated documents and the process of reflection is also reproduced. Hence if the reader trusts or accepts the author on the basis of citing the source of quotation, he has in reality no grounds for distrusting him because that one document is not named. History is simply not the arithmetic total of footnotes (p. 491)." But what if one does not trust the author, does not think the quotation is accurate, or, more commonly, suspects that the author has distorted the context to which Williams refers? That problem goes to the methodological core of the discipline itself, which explains why professional historians who disagreed with Williams, or did not like his radical interpretations, could so easily dismiss his work. With LeFeber, however, they could not invoke that strategy. I discuss the methodological importance of source citation in constructing democratic history in "In the Name of History," Latin American Research Review 25:3 (1990):40-56. The reviewer cited in the text is Morton Rothstein, in the Journal of Economic History, 25:1 (March, 1965): 160-61.

3. This traditional view, which in effect blamed the people of the U.S. for the advent of imperialism, was forcefully advanced during the 1930s and 1940s in the classic works of the dean of U.S. diplomatic historians, Samuel Flagg Bemis. Bemis considered the "short lived benevolent" period of U.S. imperialism, launched in 1898, a "great aberration." See the Preface and Chapter VIII of The Latin American Policy of the United States (New York, 1943) and A Diplomatic History of the United States (3rd ed., New York, 1950), pp. 463-75. For the argument that U.S. business opposed the war, Bemis depended on the influential study by Julius W. Pratt, The Expansionists of 1898 (Baltimore, 1936). These views dominated mainstream liberal U.S. interpretations of the origins of the War throughout the 1940s and 1950s and went
unchallenged in a major new study of the rise of the U.S. to
great power status by Ernest R. May, Imperial Democracy (New
York, 1961).
4. LaFeber took special pains in The New Empire to deal with the
Pratt thesis, showing among other things how McKinley was deeply
sympathetic with the expansionist goals of a powerful new
organization of industrialists, the National Association of
manufacturers, and demonstrating how many businessmen who
initially opposed the war did so primarily out of fear that
warfare could stifle the embryonic economic recovery from the
severe depression of the mid 1890s, which was underway by 1898.
LaFeber documented how, in the weeks immediately preceding the
declaration of war, influential elements of big business swung
away from that position, hoping that war would end the chronic
"uncertainty" generated by the situation in Cuba. See his
Chapter VIII, "Approach To War," pp. 326-406. Pratt apparently
accepted the thrust of LaFeber's argument. He commended
LaFeber's achievement in a positive review (Pacific Historical
Review 33:3 [Aug., 1964]:360-62), which criticized LaFeber only
for his failure to point out "how perfectly the economic thinking
that he describes fitted into Marxian theory," and for not
emphasizing that concern for the "suffering and death prevailing
in Cuba" was also a cause for U.S. intervention. LaFeber refers
only tangentially to Ernest May's Imperial Democracy in The New
Empire, but in a review of May's second book on the subject,
American Imperialism (New York, 1968), he chides him for having
"decontaminated" U.S. imperialism by reducing the fifteen-year
period (1898-1913) traditionally labeled imperialist by U.S.
scholars to a brief period of "direct territorial acquisition."
As LaFeber put it, "After three decades of scholarship, we now
have it down to two months." LaFeber also attacked the way May's
argument made imperialism "a mere manifestation of public
opinion, not the result of government policy." The review
appeared in Book World 2:36 (Sept. 8, 1968).
5. Walter Frederick LaFeber, "The Latin American Policy of the
Second Cleveland Administration," Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.,
University of Wisconsin, 1959, p. ii.
7. Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York, 1974).
8. A highly suggestive effort to begin to answer some of these
questions is Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Special Sorrows: Irish-,Polish-, and Yiddish-American Nationalism and the Diasporic
Jacobson shows how most spokesman of these white immigrant
communities initially opposed U.S. imperialism, seeing it as an
undemocratic, corrupting force that could transform U.S. society
in the image of the European politics they had left. But as the
post 1898 debate developed over annexation of colonies populated
by "darker races" many of these same people began to identify
with the nationalist and racialist assumptions that rationalized
U.S. expansionism.
Although U.S. expansionism, both before 1898 and since, is
often explained in racial terms, the celebrated debate between imperialists and so-called anti-imperialists after 1898 reveals that racial fears served as a brake on a formal U.S. policy of colonialism. Anti-imperialist spokesmen like Carl Schurz saw in the incorporation of darker, "primitive" races a threat to stability and democratic institutions at home. Imperialists, such as Henry Cabot Lodge, apparently feared the social threat of discontented U.S. workers and farmers even more. Lodge defended annexation of the Phillipines before the U.S. Senate in 1900 by arguing that such a policy would operate "most particularly for the advantage of our farmers and our workmen, upon whose well-being, and upon whose full employment at the highest wages, our entire fabric of society and government rests." Statements by Lodge and Schurz are reproduced in the reader edited by Theodore P. Greene, American Imperialism in 1898 (Boston, 1955), 70-84; the quotation from Lodge appears on pp. 72-73. Both sides in the debate agreed, however, on a policy of foreign commercial expansion. As LaFeber makes clear in his epilogue to The New Empire, pp. 407-17, imperialists and anti-imperialists agreed on that end; they differed only on the question of the wisdom of formal colonial means.


11. In the book of that title (New York, 1980). By that phrase Williams meant more than the liberal assumptions that preclude community based on "social property." He also meant the increasingly unconscious belief that the solution to all domestic problems lay in foreign expansion.