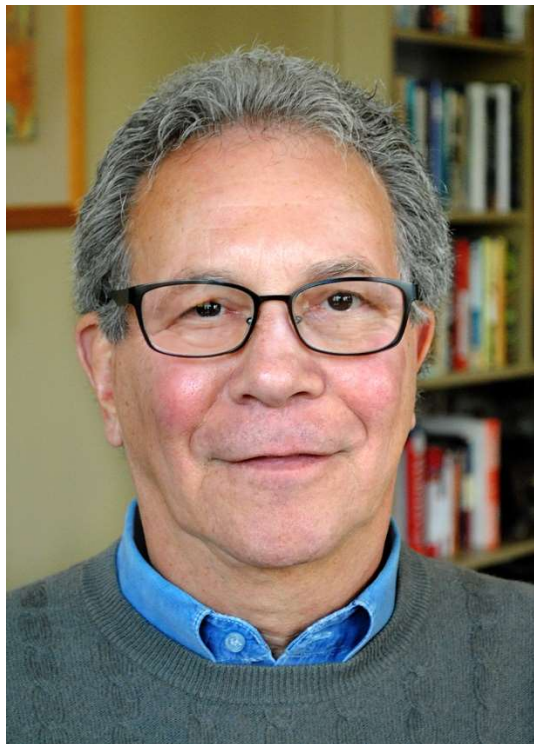


A Conversation with Dr. Richard Immerman



In this interview, I speak with former CENFAD director Dr. Richard Immerman about his former mentor, Dr. Walter LaFeber. We focus on Dr. Immerman's efforts to organize a memorial conference, the impact of LaFeber on the history of foreign policy, and changes in the historical discipline.

Joseph Johnson: Good morning! Thank you for joining me this morning to talk about the Walter LaFeber conference that you organized.

Richard Immerman: I'm happy to do so.

JJ: I guess my big question is: how did you pull this off?

RI: Well, it was a somewhat convoluted process. The origin dates back to about two years ago, not long after Walt died. Several of us had been asked to put together, or serve on, a roundtable discussion at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) conference, which at that point was totally virtual. So we did that, and subsequently discussed various ways that we might be able to pay tribute to Walt; keeping in mind that while he was alive he wanted nothing remotely resembling a tribute to himself. That's sort of the person he was. He thought we had better things to do than to figure out how to pay tribute to our mentor.

So, within that vein, about a dozen of got together at Frank Costigliola's farm in Connecticut that fall. I was actually at Williams at the time, so it was for me to drive over, and the family came down. Lloyd Gardner and his wife Nancy. For those who don't know, Lloyd was Walt's closest, long-standing friend, going back to graduate days at Wisconsin together. We sat around all day just reminiscing and talking, and out of that we decided that we would put together a volume, a *festschrift*. We structured it and it would be built around this as the core, but we would invite his other students.

At that point, I mentioned that I had ideas how we could fundraise for this. We thought of having a workshop in Ithaca, and that then grew into the idea of having both a

workshop and a conference. One of the primary donors to it, Andrew Tisch, who had also funded Walt's last chair at Cornell, and organized a farewell talk that Lecture gave. That was so in-demand that they moved it to the Beacon Theatre in New York where three thousand former students attended, which is quite a testimony to who he was. He [Tisch] said, "if you want to have this thing, who's going to go to Ithaca?" The Williams had offered to let us do it there for free, but who's going to go to one at Williams? And Jeff Engel, one of the people said we could it at Dallas, where SMU has a campus. While that was quite exciting, who was going to go to Dallas? We decided to do it in New York at the new tech campus, which none had seen.

I ended up involved primarily with the fundraiser. And because I'm a pretty good organizer and have a lot of experience, I ended up doing ninety-nine percent of the organizing. This took an awful lot of time. I would say a concentrated time for close to six months, and certainly the last couple of months was very intense. I was working with Cornell's Alumni Affairs office, the caterers, and the graduate hotel on campus. Then there's the campus itself. They had different people, and there were lots of moving parts. In any case, it happened, and it was very successful. The LaFeber family presented me with a wonderful bottle of cognac.

JJ: You talked about organizing experience. Have you ever organized anything on this scale before? I mean, you said you had the support of Cornell, but you didn't necessarily have the institutional support of something like SHAFR.

RI: No, I haven't. I did some conferences and symposium workshops in which I worked with the Davis Fellow, but it was nothing of this scale. Not even close to it.

Way back when I was asked to organize a conference on John Foster Dulles at Princeton University, in the late 1980s, it was close to this scale. It was huge. But I was basically the brains behind the outfit. I didn't do any of the work that was complicated. Princeton had an infrastructure that was fabulous and involved from the beginning. So while I did things like test the menu, most of my contribution was to conceptualize the conference, to invite contacts and to cajole participants into coming. It was a little tricky, because I came up with this idea of having people give papers, and then having former Dulles associates comment on them. They were still alive at that point.

It was a cavalcade of stars who I got to give papers. I was not quite forty at that point, so it was a pretty heady experience for me. So I did then, and I knew it. Then there was the CENFAD stuff. But in this case, the Cornell alumni affairs was not involved until the last six weeks of planning. Up until then, I did it all myself. That included, making reservations for everybody. I had never done anything like this. I don't think many people in the academic world have done this type of thing. Most of it was actually a joy.

Those of us that were involved in the project called ourselves, The Posse. I knew about half the people to begin with, and got to know the others because of our relationship to Walt. He attracted a certain type of student. We all got along really well. We were putting together the volume at the same time. That was almost an afterthought, but for us that was the primary goal. That was the product we wanted, not the conference. The conference was to support the volume. There was really a synergy between them which became so great that they were inseparable. I was working on my chapter of the volume, as well as being editor of the volume at the same time. I'm reading all of the essays, even as I was organizing things.

It's good I was retired. There's no way in hell I could have done anything if I had to spend this amount of time. I would have to teach, or all my students would have been very aware that they did not Immerman's full attention during this time. Goodness, it's really something you could only do at this time.

JJ: Wow! It seems like such a testament to LaFeber's personality and his influence. I'm assuming The

Posse was made up of all formal students.

RI: It was really. As I said, it began with this sort of informal core that developed out of this roundtable. But also, there were a couple of people on the roundtable who I didn't know. But the SHAFR president at the time knew, and he suggested we invited others. We were all students split evenly by

serendipity between his undergraduate and graduate students. That was really important because he was a legendary undergraduate educator. That was what we all talked about. Whether a graduate student, or an undergraduate student, our most vivid memories and formative experiences were in this lecture course that he taught in two semesters on the

history of US foreign policy. When I was there it met on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning with five hundred students and their families. On a Saturdays families would visit, girlfriends would visit, and they say 'you have to go to this lecture.' It took place in Bailey Hall, which was this auditorium, and there were articles about what it was like to take this course.

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ourselves after Walt, in terms of this lecture. It is one of the reasons that people like myself will never, ever abandon the lecture format in our teaching. It was so important, and we believe in it and that it can be equally, if not more effective, than interactive learning. There was just an article that said the pendulum has to no lectures, and all small classes. If you ever took a walk through LaFeber's lecture course, there's no way you're going to accept that hierarchy in pedagogy. Graduate students were the TAs, and Frank Costigliola was my TA. We didn't know each other, though I never went to class. I was too involved in anti-war stuff.

But we became close friends afterwards. This was one of the things we all reminisced about. And then, at the conference, we had policy makers. Steven Hadley, George W. Bush's National Security Advisor, and Eric Edelman, Dick Cheney's Chief of Staff. At these roundtables we had policymakers talking about his influence on them, and we had others, law professors, and business professionals, who talked about his influence. The conference was great.

On Friday night there was a reception, and we played a video what I'll call a 'farewell address' as an Eisenhower person. It was a time for reminisces and recollections. On Saturday, all of us presented our papers. And on Sunday, we had these two roundtables: one of former policymakers, and others of what we call sculptors of modern America,

where people are from business, law, and higher education.

The last one was sort of neat, because during the Q&A session, I asked them 'As a former chair of a history department, I had many conversation with students and their parents would come in and talk to me because they wanted to be history majors and their parents disagreed. But you are were history majors who went on to be movers and shakers in the world. How would you talk to those parents?' And it was fabulous. I mean, it was terrific. In fact, we're thinking of maybe having some sort of follow-up institute in which we would invite prospective students to learn about the value of studying history in terms of the contemporary world.

That was the type of thing we talked in addition to going over the papers of the volume, which has not come out yet. But I was called by one of the reviewers who said it should be a template for all future tribute volumes. The volume will be coming out with Cornell University Press.

JJ: That sound like such a fulfilling opportunity to really discuss history, especially with people who have this connection through LaFeber.

RI: Of all these people, we have generations. One of the things about The Posse is we're basically three to four generations of his students. We believe we have his first PhD student, named David Green, who got his PhD in the early 1960s. But he was also an undergraduate. So that goes back to the 1950s, and it

extends to those who got their PhD in the 1990s, or completed undergraduate work, as Walt basically stopped taking students after then.

JJ: I think we might be taking for granted whether or not our readers know who LaFeber is. You and I both know who he is, and the impact he has had. But, could you just discuss a bit about his influence on the field and his connection to the Wisconsin School?

RI: That's really the beginning of the book. That's the foundation, and it was a theme that ran all through the conference. Walt was, in a way, the second generation of the Wisconsin School. Most people will say it's first-generation, but there was Fred Harvey Harrington, who was a historian of US foreign policy at University of Wisconsin-Madison in the 1950s. At that point, Wisconsin arguably had the best American history program in the United States. Actually, a number of Temple faculty did work at one point or another at the University of Wisconsin. Alan Davis worked with Merle Curti. It was an embarrassment of riches there.

One of Harrington's students was William Appleman Williams. I hope that every Temple graduate student, whether they do foreign policy or not, know who William Appleman Williams is. I mean, one of the things I bemoan is that when I was a graduate student we paid a lot more attention to historiography than today. I understand, because there's so much new stuff coming

out. We are all built on the shoulders of giants, and all of that. What's not know much is that Williams was also a product of the University of Wisconsin, that's where he got his PhD. Fred Harrington then became President of the University of Wisconsin and Williams was elevated to take his position.

A number of students come at that time, the late 1950s. And the three most renowned are Walter LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, who I mentioned before, and Thomas McCormick. Gardner and McCormick opted to work with Williams, while LaFeber stayed with Harrington. So, they actually didn't all have the same advisor, which people don't know, although they were often in the same seminars together. The three of them became like the Three Musketeers. They write a textbook together and other things. This becomes the Wisconsin School, and it challenges the primary historiographic frameworks, and interpretations, which are twofold. One is the more conventional, orthodox nationalist school of foreign policy, like Samuel Flagg Bemis. Then there's the realists, which is at that point Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan. Then there's also Arthur Schlesinger floating around, going back and forth between the two camps. But the revisionist US interpretation associated with Williams challenges that, and he wrote a book called *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.

It is his challenge. And he basically argues that, not that he's an

economic determinist, but that American framework, or ideology, its world view, which is based on capitalism and economics and believes what's good for America is good for the world, has led to tragic consequences in the developing world. It becomes known as revisionism. So the Wisconsin School is associated with revisionism. That's the term. It's not one size fits all, it's more inclusive than that. So, when I was a graduate student in the sixties and early seventies, we were exposed to these three different schools: nationalist, realist, and revisionist. Those of us who became associated with LaFeber, Gardner, and McCormick, we evolved in this revisionist tradition, which gained ascendancy during Vietnam.

It's a big part of my life and a part of my scholarship. With the end of the Cold War, I think we move into more realist type stuff. There's not many people who still cling to the orthodox interpretations. So LaFeber is very instrumental and the evolution of the field is why his book are so important. He wrote a book called *The New Empire*. That's a famous book, and it is his first book. The use of the word 'empire' to describe American foreign policy was heresy compared to British or French efforts – but those were the Old World. People argued that the

United States did not pursue empire. We were more altruistic, more idealistic. We don't do those sort of things. Along comes LaFeber, and he writes *The New Empire*, which showed that you can have an empire without formal colonies. It leads to tremendous debates, conversations and dialogues within the field. Even those who think that LaFeber is the devil admit that it has been incredibly constructive.

The title of our volume is *Thinking Otherwise*. We go out of the box to challenge conventional wisdom. That's what he taught us. That quote, by the way, comes from another Cornell Historian named Carl Becker in his presidential address to the American Historical Association. Those who

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were at the conference were treated to this amazing conversation about the evolution of the field of American history, not just foreign policy.

JJ: I keep thinking about what you said about the focus on historiography, and the importance of these authors who wrote such paradigm changing texts. Why do you think that has changed in the discipline? Is it because of the volume of things coming out, as you mentioned? Or just because there are so many perspectives being offered outside of a narrow interpretational framework like the three schools of foreign policy? Why have we become more removed from

that? Is it the number of PhDs out there?

RI: I don't know. I've asked myself that question a lot, and I tried to address it in my classes. I taught a basic historiography course on foreign policy every year. I hardly ever the research seminar. This is what I did. The students loved it, but I knew they read a ton, but often people didn't read at all. Today they don't read *Tragedy*, they learn about it by reading what other people wrote about it. My students read *The New Empire*, and new about the Wisconsin School, and how it fit into this stuff. But, I think it's just the amount of reading we have to do. There's so much new stuff coming, and they're grand narratives. So many are specialized monographs which we have to know. You don't have the type of major synthesis because we criticize the synthesis. We don't read them. We're not giving tenure if we write syntheses.

You talked about these texts being paradigm shifts, but it's changed more than that. US foreign policy has become US in the World. Military history is different, it's not operational military history it's War and Society. Those sort of changes are happening. How do you keep up with that? If you do US in the World, it means you have to read everything. And in our field we have to work in a foreign language. That

was pretty much required, but it didn't used to be. Walt wrote stuff, but did not have command of another language. Williams never had command of another language. So the students develop area expertise on different countries and it's not just Washington-centered. It's much more being brought in, like culture. One of our students, Kate O'Connell, ended up doing food studies in her work. There's so much you can do. The problem is that you're scrambling to keep up with the fabulous and original work that's being done. But, can you go back to read George Bancroft, like I did? I'm not sure people read Arthur Schlesinger anymore. Not that I'm a fan, but God, he was important. Or what about his father, who in many

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ways was more important? He was the father of urban history. What about Frederick Jackson Turner? We just don't have time to do that. So, at least I'm aware of it, but I don't know how many other people may. We talk about the Turner thesis, and people sit

around and talk about what that influences and challenges.

Now we have international history, and transnational history. It makes things that much more difficult. And I'm only talking about my field! At Temple, we had the advantage of having multiple faculty members working in international history. Petra Goedde and I worked very closely together, but we

complemented each other. We did this handbook on the Cold War for Oxford that we were able to bring to many universities. And now you have Alan who replaced me, so we still have that. But at many universities you have one person in a field, and that's becoming more and more common as faculty sizes shrinking. Department faculty is shrinking all over the place.

JJ: There's a real paradox at play, isn't there? The volume and scope of the content that we're getting is greater than ever, as tenure track faculty lines are shrinking across the board.

RI: As I said, I don't have the solution to it. But yeah. What I will say is every one of those people who participated in the conference roundtable would argue to the end of time how vital their study of history was to developing their skill sets. That they brought that to whatever career they pursued. Also, that historiography and methods are important because of debates that were integral to the subjects, as opposed to learning what happened. What were the causes of the Spanish-American War, or the War of 1898? There's a synergy, a complement, you cannot have one without the other. But I think that's the case, and that was the certainly the case with those us who studied with LaFeber and his concept of thinking otherwise.

JJ: Let's talk more about your work with CENFAD. You were the first director here at CENFAD. Did you think that you would go on to lead a

center and pursue your own programs?

RI: No, never, not even close. I think I've mentioned it before. I know I have. For example, I discuss this think I had to write for H-Diplo. They asked a bunch of us senior people to do it, but I always tell this story. When I came to Temple, I was recruited as a senior historian. That was the idea of Russ Weigley and Waldo Heinrichs. They wanted to build on what they had done, which was somewhat serendipitous, to have two very prominent historians – one doing diplomatic, and one doing military, which allowed Temple to become quite distinguished in that area.

They brought in three finalists for the position. They didn't go over well, and I got asked to apply. And you know, that was history. I did not know until I came for an interview that they had discussed this idea of building a center. I thought it was a great idea because the other person who was here was David Rosenberg. At that point David Rosenberg was an expert in naval history, but also nuclear history. He was a MacArthur genius! You put together Weigley, Heinrich, and Rosenberg and you have quite a core. So my moving into that situation was very attractive. And the idea of institutionalizing that strength also was quite attractive. So it was eventually part of the appeal. But I had no idea that the expectation was that I would lead this thing.

I didn't volunteer, but I didn't protest. It was just something I could do. So I did it. We struggled initially. I actually tried to get Temple to hire an executive director, a friend of mine who appears in a number of documents, named Paul Miles. Miles was a Rhodes Scholar who had developed the international history track at West Point. He was a retired colonel, and he was absolutely brilliant. He got his degree at Princeton, and would have been very interested. He helped me write the mission statement. Russ was also on board. But Miles would only do it if Temple allowed him to teach as well as be executive director. The administration didn't want to do that, and so I became executive director.

So that's how it came. We struggled a little bit to begin with, but it was the student who wanted it to be more than it was. They wanted to be more involved.

It was actually my student Drew McKevitt, a Davis Fellow, who helped me launch the Colloquium series. That was really terrific. That was one way for us to reach out to more people in the field. I remember several people saying that speaking Temple was part of the tour. If you didn't get invited to speak, you knew you weren't anybody.

JJ: This is all fascinating as someone currently working as the Davis Fellow. I've had the good fortune of speaking with multiple people who have long connection with CENFAD. I conducted interviews with Debbie Sharnak,

and Beth Bailey. It's amazing to see the impact CENFAD has had on the community.

RI: The Davis fundraiser was another one of my students. His idea was to use this as a way to attract the best and brightest of the students who were interested in anything to do with CENFAD. We defined it very broadly, and it has worked. If you go through the list of Davis Fellows, they have had very successful careers despite the fact that the job market just imploded. They got jobs, they publish their books, and I think the experience really helped.

JJ: Well, I have seen you at lots of events this year, and it is always nice to see you around. It's been exciting to learn more about the Temple history department, the university, and CENFAD. Thank you for sharing all your knowledge, and experience with me. Is there anything else that you'd like to add for the community?

RI: Just to keep it up. It's a great thing. I think Temple punches above its weight. We don't have the resources of the Ivies, but we do have the reputation. We do have the faculty. And we do have the students. That's what really makes for a great university and a great university experience. I've always taken a great deal of pride and pleasure knowing that CENFAD contributed in a very way. And that will continue, I am sure, under Alan's directorship. And as long he continues to attract students like

yourself, and others that I have met through CENFAD, I don't worry.

The only other thing I'll say is that the LaFeber volume, which I think is valuable for historiography, is that the chapters are based around Walt's books. There are six major books and those are the six core chapters of the book. We use his books as foundations to write our chapters. So there's a lot of historiography in there. The book won't be out until next year, but when it does release it will also be open access.

JJ: Oh, excellent! Once again that's *Thinking Otherwise*, out from Cornell University Press next year. Thank you very much for your time, Dr. Immerman. I appreciate it.