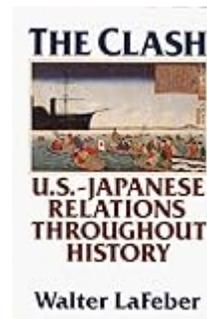


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Walter LaFeber. *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. xxii + 508 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-31837-1; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-03950-4.



Reviewed by Jon Thares Davidann (Hawaii Pacific University)

Published on H-US-Japan (September, 1998)

Walter LaFeber's recent book, *The Clash*, should give both Japanese and Americans pause considering the current tensions between the two nations over the direction and pace of Japan's plans for economic recovery. LaFeber argues that the pattern between the United States and Japan, who have at times been staunch allies in the last one-hundred-fifty-years, has been one of almost constant conflict.

LaFeber, whose work on U.S.-Soviet relations in the cold war is well-known among Americanists, makes a concerted effort in this book to look carefully at both sides of the Pacific in the historical relationship between Japan and the United States. He spends almost as much time on Japanese issues as on American interests and developments, and he moves the book beyond just diplomatic history at several junctures into other related concerns such as culture and internal politics. While the title stretches the scope of the book a bit (LaFeber gives almost no coverage to the period before 1853), this is indeed a very good book. It has won the Bancroft, an American history award, and LaFeber has used his expertise in the history of American diplomacy well in crafting the American material into a highly-engaging, sometimes quite novel-like narrative. While the Japanese interests are also very well represented in general, there are more concerns here.

LaFeber's material on Japan suffers from several kinds of problems. He falls into a questionable generalization about the Japanese, he makes a debatable interpretation, and his grasp of the chronology of Japanese history falters at times. LaFeber begins the book by arguing that the history of relations between the U.S. and Japan has been one of conflict in the modern era. This framework is welcome and promises to bring to light issues which have lain submerged because the missionaries and diplomats who narrated U.S.-Japanese histories in the past emphasized cooperation. I have found this in my own work on U.S. missionaries and Japanese Christians. However, it is LaFeber's explanation for the "clash" which concerns me. He uses a dichotomy between order and disorder to describe the kind of society and economic system each nation pursued. The Japanese sought order or "wa" in their culture and economy. The Americans had a more pluralist and open outlook, and consequently they were more comfortable with disorder. First, the Japanese character for "wa" is translated in more than one way and is better translated as peace or harmony than as order, and certainly peace and harmony are not equivalent to disorder. Even if peace and harmony or even order were actually sought by the Japanese at a collective or national level, there is another problem here. LaFeber states that Japan was frightened of disorder. However, isn't the role of government in any society to construct

and maintain order? If this is true, aren't all nations terrified of disorder to a certain extent? Then there is the question of Japanese goals. The political "order" of Japan before the Meiji period was one characterized by a relatively high degree of decentralization in the Tokugawa period, and the Shogunal leadership had to put into place extreme measures such as a hostage system, and other requirements to keep order. In the Meiji period, Japanese leaders very quickly consolidated Japan into a modern centralized government. Did the Japanese do this because they were terrified of disorder or because they were afraid of Western imperialism?[1] One can point to several instances where disorder was tolerated or even rewarded by the Japanese system: the rise of political parties, the riots of the post-Russo-Japanese War era, the assassinations in the late 1920s-30s. Certainly, one can also point to many instances where the Americans did not embrace a disorderly, and pluralistic society but were rather terrified by it. The developments of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization at the turn of century raised the blood pressure in many a good Victorian-middle-class heart. The Progressive movements were founded in part to tame this new teeming environment. This is not to say that there have been no differences between the Japanese and American social, political, and economic systems, but simply to say that the order-disorder dichotomy impoverishes the debate about those differences.

Perhaps what is most blatantly missing from the explanation of conflicts between the Japanese and Americans is the rising nationalism in both countries in the late nineteenth century. Japanese nationalism in the 1890s placed cooperation with Western nations under great pressure. The Japanese had to choose between their nation and foreign ways, and there was precious little room for negotiation. The case of lese majeste against Uchimura Kanzo underlines this problem.[2] U.S. nationalism in the same period made its imprint on all forms of cultural transmission to the outside world, including Japan. This fact, in turn, meant that interrelationships with the outside world were tinged with American nationalism. The expectation grew that what worked for the United States would work for the rest of the world. U.S. citizens abroad, such as American missionaries, pushed American-centered approaches, such as an American style of Christianity, with great fervor. Their faith and their nation became fused. Japanese Christians disagreed with this notion, and conflict between American missionaries and Japanese Christians was the unambiguous result. Even today, American

politicians, journalists, and economists would like to impose an American-style solution upon the Japanese political establishment to current Japanese economic problems. They are having no more success than did American missionaries one hundred years ago.

LaFeber's interpretation concerning Japanese imperialism early in the book is also problematic. His argument that Japan saw itself as a replacement for China as center of the universe in East-Asia in the pre-modern period, and for this reason became imperialist in the modern era, needs closer scrutiny. Japanese leaders in the Tokugawa period might have wished that Japan could be at the center of East-Asia but had few illusions about the reality of this dream. Instead, a defensive nationalism is evident in Japanese cultural forms such as artistic expression, as Japan tried to shed its role as a subservient tributary state to China. So we must look elsewhere for explanations about Japanese imperialism. Beyond the economic and security issues at stake between the 1870s-1900s, of which LaFeber has a strong grasp, there is the issue of the Japanese vision of its role in East Asia. This vision underwent a transformation in the 1890s. Not only did the Japanese begin to refer to the West instead of East-Asia as the point of reference by which national progress should be measured, but Japanese intellectuals also began to think of Japan as the conveyor of progress from the West to the rest of East-Asia. Within Japanese development after 1900, a model for the rest of East-Asia emerged, a model by which East-Asians could extricate themselves from Western dominance and move into a world of progress without sacrificing their identity.[3] So the issue of Japanese imperialism is quite complex. LaFeber's explanation, flawed at the beginning, improves significantly with his concentration on the threats and opportunities represented by China, which has almost always loomed large in the Japanese mind, and continues to do so today.

LaFeber's chronology at the turn of the century raises some questions. He argues that Japanese-American relations did not sour until after 1900. Concerning diplomatic issues, this is an appropriate break. Especially after the Russo-Japanese War, Americans began to realize that Japan was a real threat to their interests in East-Asia. But because LaFeber seems to want to address the overall relationship, the timing needs some adjustment. Among informal contacts between Japanese and Americans in Japan, there were obvious signs of tension as early as 1890. For instance, roving gangs of Japanese young men or "soshi" attacked foreigners on the streets of Tokyo in this period.

These criticisms are substantial and take some of the luster off of *The Clash*, but it must be said that, even given these problems, this is a work of major importance. It is perhaps the ambitious scope of LaFeber's effort that opens the work to the criticisms already leveled. But there are significant achievements throughout the book, and because the book is written in a splendid flowing narrative style, the achievements will become that much more important as this book reaches a wider readership.

LaFeber excels in a number of areas. First, his concentration on China as the linchpin in U.S.-Japanese relations is solid. The material on economic exploitation in Manchuria and the threat Japan represented for the American open-door policy is well done. He gives the reader insight into some arenas which have traditionally been neglected in studies of the relationship. The Washington Conference, and the development of the zaibatsu in Japan are two such points. It turns out the Washington Conference of 1921-22 was a huge success for the Americans. According to LaFeber, the United States solidified the open door, tore down the Anglo-Japanese alliance, and resolved the issue of Shantung. The Americans were so successful, in fact, that U.S. diplomats spent the rest of the 1920s-1930s trying to protect their gains. This conservative approach left them with fewer options when conditions in world diplomacy were transformed by the Great Depression. LaFeber also argues that the Conference was highly successful for the Japanese. Here I think he exaggerates the point. The Japanese made sacrifices in order to prop open the door to the American market and dollar flow. They gave up the Shantung Peninsula and agreed to a disarmament quota which made them significantly junior to the British and Americans. LaFeber makes a good point here that the disarmament treaty actually allowed the Japanese de-facto naval superiority in the Pacific because the American Pacific fleet stayed well under its quota. But after the door slammed shut in 1930, the sacrifices made earlier were used by the militarists to argue that Japan had appeased the West and damaged its own national pride. LaFeber also takes accurate aim at the Japanese conglomerates, the zaibatsu. The zaibatsu, according to LaFeber, benefited even when the rest of Japan suffered, as in the late twenties when Baron Dan Takuma, head of Mitsui, bet against the yen and Mitsui reaped great profits as the yen and Japan plummeted into economic depression. In the early 1930s, the zaibatsu had developed a well-earned contempt in the Japanese public eye and so needed public relations help. They set-up patriotic associations to link themselves with the new power-brokers in Japan, the militarists, and succeeded in

maintaining their grip upon Japan. Here LaFeber's arrow hits the center of the target. His understanding of economic imperatives and diplomacy is excellent throughout the book.

There is a vast accumulation of information about the relationship between Japan and the U.S. in the book. This in itself is a considerable accomplishment and makes the book valuable to anyone who has an interest in this field. Finally, the book is so readable with wonderful anecdotes, colorful characters, and witty comments on these characters that I found myself chuckling throughout. General Douglas MacArthur comes in for some marvelously irreverent teasing. The multiple photo sessions upon MacArthur's return to the Philippines (he walked in from the water three times so that the cameramen could get good angles), and an exchange about MacArthur between Senator William Fulbright and statesman John Foster Dulles later seal the issue. Of course, MacArthur is an easy target, but there are also stories about the Japanese. LaFeber writes that in response to the American rebuilding of Japan's economy after World War II, another Asian prime minister joked about Japanese prosperity, saying that the best approach to economic development was to attack the Americans, then let them occupy your country. The book is about four hundred pages long and so will work very nicely as a text in a U.S.-Japanese relations course. *The Clash*, even with the flaws on the Japanese side, is a significant milestone in the history of the relationship between the U.S. and Japan.

Notes

[1]. There is continuing debate among Japanese specialists about the nature of the Meiji restoration. Was the civil war revolutionary or just a fight between regions of Japan unhappy with one another? Was it a nationalist response to the threat of imperialism from the West and just a way to square old rivalries? The fear of disorder argument has not been a part of this debate. See Hilary Conroy, Harry Wray, eds., *Japan Examined: Perspectives on Modern Japanese History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983. for an overview of some of the arguments.

[2]. See Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. p. 132 for the Uchimura incident and a comprehensive analysis of rising Japanese nationalism in the 1890s. My own work also indicates this trend (Jon Thares Davidann, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan 1890-1930*. [Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Lehigh University Press, 1998] Chapter two).

[3]. Stefen Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*. Berkeley: California University Press, 1993. Davidann, Chapters two and five.

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Citation: Jon Thares Davidann. Review of LaFeber, Walter, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

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