

Rachel de Barros Sellers
TAHG Year 3
Book Review Assignment
September 14, 2011

***Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* by
Walter LaFeber**

I had heard about *Inevitable Revolutions* as an undergraduate student, in my Latin America Studies class at Mesa State College in Colorado. I remember my professor had said it was a must read for anyone interested in understanding U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America, and we were required to read a few chapters of it. As a Latina myself, who throughout the years has become an American history enthusiast, I decided to read the book to enhance and deepen my knowledge about U.S. relations toward the region, and at the same time refresh my modern diplomatic history, which has always been one of my favorite areas in history.

In spite of its complexity and length, I found LaFeber's writing style and breadth of scholarship engrossing, and was captivated by his objective analysis of the subject and critical view of the United States foreign policy in Central America. He is not the first historian to focus on this evolving relationship, but is certainly one of the most distinguished among modern American scholars. Before reading *Inevitable Revolutions*, I had read *The Last Years of the Monroe Doctrine* by Gaddis Smith, and *The Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano, as an undergraduate. Both books opened my eyes and made me more aware of United States-Latin America relations. When participating in the TAHG summer sessions, I learned more about the Cuban Missile Crisis, and also how the Cold War ideology and reality impacted world events. However, I wish we had discussed more than just Cuba, and how the fear of "red revolutions" in the hemisphere led to the rise of oppressive

militarist regimes in Third World countries and active involvement of the CIA in Central America and South America. That is why I felt the need to read *Inevitable Revolutions*. I feel that by gaining more knowledge and understanding of U.S.-Latin America relations from the Monroe Doctrine to the present, I can present to my American Studies students a more realistic and unbiased perspective on the subject.

LaFeber's revised and expanded 1993 edition of his 1983 book remains one of the most respected analysis of United States foreign policy vis-à-vis Central America ever published in modern times. It chronicled the 1980s as a decade of unrelenting and devastating conflict in the region that resulted in a serious debate in this country about its role in Central America. Even though LaFeber tries to focus on this critical decade, his book provides the reader with an extensive and at times an exhaustive diplomatic history that traces developments as far back as the early 1800s, when the Monroe Doctrine was the public announcement of Thomas Jefferson's private opinion that "America was a hemisphere to itself"(23). However, Monroe's secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, had no desire in 1821 to recognize the independency of the new republics in Central America, arguing that they would be "incapable of establishing free institutions of government"(24).

For much of the 19th century, however, British entrepreneurs and the British fleet dominated Central America, and the claims of the Monroe Doctrine were simply jingoistic bravado. It was only in the 1850s, when daring "filibusters", Americans from New Orleans, New York, and Baltimore, who set sail for Central America in pursuit of expanding slavery or profiting in business, that the region became relevant to U.S. interests. LaFeber mentions one of these filibusters, a man named William Walker, who ruled Nicaragua between 1855 and 1857. In spite of unsuccessful attempts to unseat him by local leaders and despite his illegal incursions into a sovereign state, Walker was recognized diplomatically by the American establishment in Washington. Mr. Walker

only met his downfall when he tried to sabotage the steamship of Cornelius Vanderbilt, one of America's most powerful capitalists. (30-31)

In Central America, LaFeber claims the United States implemented a "system"—part economic, part political, part military—that sought absolute control over the economies of the so called "banana republics". Several of the chapters of his book are dedicated to elucidating this system of dominance and control, which he identifies by the following names: Setting the System, Maintaining the System, Updating the System, The Collapse of the System, The Remains of the System, and last, Rearranging the Remains of the System.

In his study of Central America, LaFeber writes of the crucial connection between U.S. foreign policy and economic security, which is his area of expertise. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* is more of a survey text in which he examines the history of relations between the United States and Central America from the nineteenth century until the 1980s. LaFeber outlines his approach to the problem by placing the Central American countries in the context of a "world system", with the theory of "neo dependency", which LaFeber defines as "a way of looking at Latin American development, not in isolation, but as part of an international system in which leading countries have used and abused their economic strength to make Latin American development dependent on and subordinate to the interests of those leading powers"(16). As a result of this policy, these countries rely exclusively on one or two exports (i.e., coffee and/or bananas), and face stunted economic growth because they are at the mercy of fluctuating world prices for their exports. LaFeber concludes that these prices are being depressed to allow the great powers control over Central America.

One of the great ironies that LaFeber exposes is the one that suggests that intense private investment promises to lift these poor people out of their wretched conditions and promote stability, harmony, peace, and above all, free trade. The reality, according to him, is that "such

investment and trade has been pivotal is misshaping those nations' history until revolution appears to be the only instrument that can break the control held by the local oligarchy and foreign capitalists." (17)

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, LaFeber suggests that the United States had established the kind of relationship with Central America that it so long desired. LaFeber uses the export numbers to make his point clear: Costa Rica's exports for 1929 totaled \$18 million (coffee and bananas); El Salvador's exports totaled \$18 million (coffee and sugar); Guatemala's exports totaled \$25 million (coffee and bananas), Nicaragua's totaled \$11 million (coffee and bananas) and Honduras exported \$25 million worth of bananas. LaFeber points out that "clearly if the prices of coffee and banana suddenly dropped on international markets, all Central America would plunge into disaster."(63)

LaFeber analysis becomes even more engaging when he discusses what happened to the region from the twentieth century on. The twentieth century led to an increase in U.S. political power in Central America. LaFeber discusses in detail what happened in Nicaragua, when revolution broke out in 1912 and 2,600 American troops helped put it down. Washington ignored the ruling of the Central American Court, which condemned the intervention, thus beginning an on-and-off again occupation of Nicaragua for over twenty-years. During the 1930s, most of Nicaragua's exports and nearly 40 percent of its imports were connected to the United States. This dependence, however, went beyond trade. Washington also imposed political and military leaders, including the Somoza dynasty. (67-68). During this time, economic dependence in the other Central American nations increased. Most of the countries, except for Costa Rica and El Salvador, had their primary crops controlled by North American investors. In Guatemala, for instance, the United Fruit Company controlled all but a few miles of railroad and a fifteenth of the total land area. In Honduras, United Fruit and its subsidiaries

controlled the rail system, port facilities, and all of the banana and rubber-producing land. (72-73). In Nicaragua, United Fruit and Atlantic Fruit claimed 300,000 acres, while other North American companies owned mines, banks and railroads. (77-80). LaFeber points out that “in nearly every instance, the interests of the State Department and North American business coincided. When they did not, the business interest usually gave way, as indeed it had to do if the system was to be maintained.”(82)

LaFeber demonstrates in great detail that despite much shifting, renaming, and organization of U.S. policy under nine presidents, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, the basis of this American policy remained the same: support for regimes that maintained order and protected private property and American interests. Several U.S. backed dictators, among them Carias in Honduras, Martinez in El Salvador, Somoza in Nicaragua, and Ubico in Guatemala, relied on the U.S. to finance their regimes, instead of the local banks. This helped consolidate American hegemony in the region. As a consequence, the Central American system was molded to fit the needs of North America. To finalize the mission, during the Roosevelt administration France and Britain were replaced by the United States as the supplier and trainer of Central American armies. Much of the food supply received by these countries, and the markets for their goods came from the Good Neighbor to the north, as well as “nearly all their foreign loans and military supplies.”(85). Meanwhile, despite increased trade and exports, the living conditions for the majority of the population of Central America had remained squalid. However, after World War II and during the Cold War serious problems and tension between the United States and Central America emerged. The “maintenance” of the system led to the newly perceived threat of communism around the world. (121)

A major shift in U.S. foreign policy in Latin America took place following the Cuban revolution. Under President Kennedy’s 1961

Alliance for Progress, the United States sought an approach to prevent socialist revolutions, such by emphasizing a combination of economic development and anti-revolutionary activity. As LaFeber points out, the latter was always given the same emphasis as the former. In theory, the main goal of the Alliance for Progress was to promote democracy and land reform in Central America without revolution. (157) However, when Lyndon Johnson succeeded John F. Kennedy, the policy shifted to the promotion of economic development and anti-communism. Because the local elites of Central America were unwilling to allow any form of democratization or structural change, the U.S. began to provide military assistance to suppress socialist revolutions. LaFeber gives the example of the twenty thousand-man U.S. Marine invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. (160)

By the time Jimmy Carter was inaugurated, the United States was in trouble both at home and abroad. The country's economic crisis and Watergate weakened the power of the presidency and the prestige of the United States overseas. Carter embarked on a complicated and contradictory path in dealing with Central America, by shifting his policy's focus on human rights. Under Carter, the United States put some pressure on the military regimes of Guatemala, El Salvador, and later Nicaragua. Following in Kennedy's footsteps, Carter wanted the military and the oligarchic elites to share power and redistribute wealth, while at the same time retaining American power and influence in the region. When faced with challenges from revolutionary groups and the elites in El Salvador and Nicaragua, Carter retreated to policies that supported the elites. Like all presidents before him, Carter refused to accept revolution as a legitimate vehicle for change in Central America. (227-28)

LaFeber concludes his analysis by focusing briefly on the Reagan administration, since his book was written in 1983. The U.S. representative to the U.N., Jeane Kirkpatrick, declared "Central America

is the most important place in the world for the United States today". Aware that U.S. American citizens were wary of involvement in another indigenous revolution, Reagan's administration tried to circumvent the problem by blaming Cuba and the Soviet Union for fueling any new revolutionary movements in Central America. This perception has been long disputed and rejected by different circles, including the media. However, they remained the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy until the end of the Cold War. (287-89). LaFeber two chapters on the 1980s are the most critical of the United States. He discusses in detail Reagan's and Bush's aggressive and failed policies toward Central America. He emphasized the wars/invasions that devastated Central America's politically and economically. He blames the failure of the Alliance for Progress, which in his words triggered the 1980s disasters. (363) By resorting to force against Central America, LaFeber claims that U.S. policy fostered more revolution and antagonism toward America. According to him, this system of dependency that connects the U.S. to Central America has made the region unable to seize their own destiny, and contributes to long-term instability in Central America.

LaFeber demonstrates persuasively in *Inevitable Revolutions that* Central America had suffered more than it had benefited from its relationship with the North American giant. He concludes that despite occasional exceptions and Costa Rica's record of political democracy, most nations of the region have been ruled for most of their history by generals and oligarchs supported by the government of United States, perpetuating centuries of paternalism and inefficiency. Despite U.S. claims of liberalism, its foreign policy toward Central America consistently demonstrates otherwise. According to LaFeber's analysis, U.S. aid to Central America has always been to protect American investments and/or to ensure security in the hemisphere. His comprehensive historical research and analysis have convinced me that, in fact, U.S. foreign policy toward Central America, and even Latin

America has much room for improvement and transparency in this post-modern fast paced world.

WORK CITED

LaFeber, Walter. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1993.