

BOOK REVIEWS

Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America. By Walter LaFeber, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983, 357 pp., \$18.95.

Reviewed by D. BRENT HARDT

These people [of Latin America] will not accept this kind of existence for the next generation. We would not, they will not. There will be changes. So a revolution is coming — a revolution which will be peaceful if we are wise enough; compassionate if we care enough; successful if we are fortunate enough — but a revolution which is coming whether we will it or not. We can affect its character; we cannot alter its inevitability. (p. 160)

Robert Kennedy, 1966.

Robert Kennedy's prophetic warning forms the inspirational focus for revisionist historian Walter LaFeber's exploration of the tumultuous history of the United States in Central America, *Inevitable Revolutions*. Unfortunately for both North and Central Americans, wisdom, concern, and good fortune were precisely the qualities lacking in the United States' dealings in its "backyard" throughout the twentieth century. As LaFeber's consistently critical history makes clear, the consequences of U.S. failures in the region have been catastrophic in political, economic, and most importantly, in human terms.

LaFeber's work is essentially a narrative — ambitious in scope, provocative in content, and ironical in style. It can be viewed through two perspectives. In the first and most obvious sense it is a broad historical sketch that brings together a disparate but rich body of material in a neglected area of U.S. diplomatic history. In a second and perhaps more revealing sense, it may be seen as an essential contribution to the present debate over U.S. policy in Central America — a debate whose participants seem to revel in their total ignorance of a past rich in historical lessons for U.S. policymakers.

As a narrative, LaFeber's book is informative but not definitive. Because of its reach, it necessarily treats many complex events and personalities in a cursory fashion, which at times makes the sequence of events difficult to follow. By providing a broad range of frameworks with which to

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approach the region, however, *Inevitable Revolutions* gives impetus to further explorations. The most notable deficiency in his research is the lack of relevant Spanish language sources. LaFeber relies primarily on diplomatic correspondence, notes of cabinet meetings from the Presidential libraries, and recently declassified documents. His narrative reflects his omission of Spanish sources in that he never develops a sense of the enduring impact of the colonial heritage on Central America.

Inevitable Revolutions is both an intellectual outgrowth and a chronological continuation of LaFeber's earlier work, *The New Empire*, in which he helped to develop the theory of informal or free-trade imperialism. In examining American expansion from 1860-1898, he observed that the United States, despite its anti-imperialist ideology, consistently pursued a policy of free-trade imperialism which sought markets for exports and cheap sources of raw materials. In *Inevitable Revolutions*, LaFeber takes this theory, applies it to events in Central America and constructs an explanation of events based on a system of "neodependency." This system is similar to the dependency system in that the United States used its economic strength to make Central American development dependent upon and subordinate to its own interests, but it goes beyond dependency in that military force is used to ensure that control. This system, LaFeber observes, "was based on principles that had worked, indeed on principles that made the United States the globe's greatest power: a confidence in capitalism, a willingness to use military force, a fear of foreign influence, and a dread of revolutionary instability." (p. 18)

In LaFeber's view, the U.S. "system" in Central America evolved not so much from a coherent plan but from a common purpose shared by every administration from Teddy Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan: a quest for order, stability and profits. The strength of LaFeber's narrative lies in his perception — and clear presentation — of the essential continuity in the aims of U.S. policy despite methods as diverse as the "Big Stick" and the "Good Neighbor," military support for dictatorships and the "Alliance for Progress." Although critical of every U.S. administration, both Republican and Democratic, LaFeber is most effective in destroying the idealistic myths that have grown up around Woodrow Wilson, the "Good Neighbor" policy, the "Alliance for Progress" and the human rights campaign of Jimmy Carter. LaFeber evaluates every administration in terms of the ideas it expressed and the reality it achieved. Because the gap between ideas and reality was greatest during these liberal administrations, they attract the harshest criticisms.

LaFeber certainly has no praise for Theodore Roosevelt's simple anti-revolutionary approach, nor for his belief that the United States was the "natural protector," and should be the main beneficiary, of Central American

affairs. Woodrow Wilson's idealistic and systematic approach, however, draws fire from LaFeber. Wilson, who had

attacked both Roosevelt's "Big Stick" diplomacy and Taft's dollar diplomacy as simply two sides of the same mis-begotten imperialism . . . succeeded only in using the "big stick" more systematically than had the man whom he had come to despise. When Hemispheric relations became difficult, Wilson reverted to what he did understand and believe: The virtue of order, the evil of revolution, and the benefits of North American — as opposed to foreign or European — enterprises. (p. 50)

Wilson's anti-imperialist words were ultimately betrayed by his imperialist actions.

During the 1920s, LaFeber observes that U.S. economic power became so dominant that it alone could be used to control the countries of Central America. North American business interests operated the transportation and communications systems, produced, bought and sold the largest crops, and also provided cash for the local governments, which were usually dictatorships. In this context, military interventions became superfluous and costly distractions which only served to focus anti-American feelings. Besides, a better method of military control seemed available at the end of the 1920s. As first tried in Nicaragua in 1927, the U.S. Marines were withdrawn and replaced by a new American-trained, non-political police force. "Only later — too late," LaFeber notes, "did these officials understand that in Central America such a force would not remain above politics, but single-handedly determine them." (p. 66) The United States had created a monster in these police forces, but one that was then leashed by American economic power. As this power began to fade in the late 1950s, the monster would grow increasingly wild and violent.

Franklin Roosevelt inherited this system and his "Good Neighbor" policy did nothing to change it. In fact, he built on the old system by accepting dictatorships with equanimity, substituting U.S. government loans for private funds, and by becoming the sole supplier of military equipment and training. The "Good Neighbor," LaFeber remarks, "carried on interventionism in Central America and tightened the system far beyond anything Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson probably imagined." (p. 81) Within this broad historical framework, LaFeber illustrates how, from Theodore Roosevelt to Franklin Roosevelt, the "system" in Central America became increasingly domineering and repressive.

The end of World War II placed new pressures on the old system that would inevitably lead to its collapse. In the context of the Cold War, the United States insisted that Central America remain a special sphere of

interest politically, but the lowest priority economically, because of the urgency of European and Japanese reconstruction needs. "It was a deadly combination," LaFeber observes, for Central Americans needed structural economic changes and vast social reforms. Indigenous reform efforts such as Arévalo's in Guatemala during the early 1950s were equated with communism in the Cold War mentality of the era and were quickly quashed by the U.S.-supported military. George Kennan expressed U.S. policy best when he said: "It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by the Communists." (p. 383) This notion formed the basis of both the Eisenhower and Nixon Administrations' policy of supporting the oligarchic-military complex with military aid and training.

Ironically, this notion also came to form the basis of John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and Jimmy Carter's human rights experiment. Their ideals had been much higher than the reality they created. Carter's human rights policy, LaFeber writes:

became the moral equivalent of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. Both men talked about revolution when they meant painfully slow evolution. Both desired more democratic societies in Central America as rapidly as possible, but without the radical changes those policies entailed. Both wanted the military-oligarch elites, long nourished by and dependent upon the United States, to share power and distribute their wealth more equitably, but neither wanted to lose U.S. power and influence that had always worked through those elites. Both men wanted change in Central America, but they dreaded revolution. In the end when they realized that one was not possible without the other, both presidents backed away from the consequences. (p. 212)

By inspiring hopes they would not fulfill, Kennedy and Carter brought on the very revolutions they had hoped to avoid. High ideals and goodwill will not solve the problems of Central America unless they are combined with historical understanding.

LaFeber's history offers a framework within which this understanding may be gained. He sees the inequitable distribution of property as the driving force behind the pressures for revolutionary change. Underlying his analysis is the belief that the problems are so vast that they cannot be solved without revolution; the time for reform has long since passed. By resisting change of any kind for almost a century, the United States distorted and divided the nations of Central America. The current revolutions, LaFeber asserts, are the result of our own policies.

It is this theme that unites the historical narrative with the current

debate. The refusal of the United States to confront the consequences of its interventionist policies has always given the domestic debate over Central American policy an ahistorical air. In the present revolutionary era, the United States can no longer afford this luxury. If the United States hopes to affect the character of the inevitable revolutions, it must approach them with the perspective offered by history. Unfortunately, Ronald Reagan's traditionalism admits of no U.S. wrongdoing while his Cold War perspective submerges the real problems of the region.

In a sense, LaFeber's whole narrative serves as a prelude to his critique of Reagan's misuse of history. Other presidents have certainly neglected Central American history. Witness Jimmy Carter, whose admission that he had read more history since 1976 than he had in all his previous years evoked the sardonic comment from LaFeber that "it would be more helpful if presidents read history before they entered office to make life-and-death decisions, and — given the fundamental change occurring in their 'backyard' — if some of that history included Central America." (p. 270) Still, the misuse (or as LaFeber terms it, the "rewriting") of history arouses his most serious criticisms.

According to LaFeber, Reagan's rewriting grew out of the need to overcome domestic reluctance to become involved in another indigenous conflict like Vietnam. To this end he sought to portray the Vietnam war as a "noble cause" and he purported to prove that the problems of Central America were not indigenous, but caused by Castro and the Soviet Union. LaFeber describes the Reagan Administration's "White Paper" on Cuban and Soviet involvement in El Salvador as an "effort to sell its version of Central American history." (p. 275) This simplistic initial effort failed to create support largely because it discounted historical realities.

Reagan and Alexander Haig regrouped, however, focusing their attentions on three shop-worn remedies that even a casual review of Central American history suggests would ultimately fail — increased military aid for El Salvador, destabilization efforts directed at Nicaragua, and a generous aid package for the Caribbean Basin. LaFeber singles out the Caribbean Basin Initiative — the brainchild of neoconservative Michael Novak — as a striking example of the lack of historical perspective typical of the Reagan Administration. Novak called for business people (not governments) to copy the North American example by developing a pluralistic market economy and for local corporations to build up structures of "middle-class democracy." To LaFeber, Novak's analysis "had little in common with Central American history after 1900." (p. 281) While Novak believes that the United States serves as an example for Latin Americans to emulate, the truth was that the United States had used its political, economic and military power to fix the marketplace so that the "magic of the marketplace"

never worked. The Caribbean Basin Initiative revealed the "chasm that separated Reaganomics from historical realities in Central America." (p. 283)

In *Inevitable Revolutions*, Walter LaFeber offers a starting point for raising the level of the current debate above polemics and bridging the chasm between U.S. policies and historical realities in Central America. By defining both the progression and the repetition of that history, he has established a framework for using it constructively. LaFeber offers no specific solutions — that is not the task of the historian — but he does suggest that only by understanding the complex history of Central America can we understand the nature of the choices we confront in the region: there will be and must be revolutionary changes. The United States can either work with the forces of revolution and share in the creation of a more equitable system, or resist them and perpetuate a tragedy.

Merchants and Migrants of Nineteenth-Century Beirut. By Leila Tarazi Fawaz, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, 182 pp., \$20.00.

Reviewed by ELIZABETH H. PRODROMOU

Although one of the eastern Mediterranean's oldest settlements, Beirut achieved its status as the premier seaport of the Levant in very recent times. It was during the course of the nineteenth century that Beirut was transformed from a provincial town of 6000 people to become greater Syria's most important city, with a population of 120,000. The city's growth was, of course, representative of the general coastal revival of the period; the rise of trade with Europe following the industrial revolution, the development of steamship navigation, and the improvement in communications with the West all contributed to Beirut's dramatic expansion. However, that the city's growth far outstripped that of its more famous neighbors — the port cities of Sidon, Tyre, Tripoli, and Acre — attests to the truly remarkable aspect of its transformation. The demographic and economic explosion of Beirut was accompanied by an even more profound political metamorphosis that was due almost entirely to immigration.

Merchants and Migrants of Nineteenth-Century Beirut is an absorbing inquiry into the relationship between migration and urbanization as it was manifested in Beirut's social transformation in the nineteenth century. Tufts University historian Leila Fawaz examines this subject on a variety of levels, giving consideration to the international, regional, and local developments underlying the city's growth. In analyzing the socioeconomic and political changes caused by these developments, the author demonstrates the way in which Beirut was transformed from a town known for its tolerance to a city sharply divided along sectarian lines. Through her study of the impact on its population of Beirut's prosperity, Professor Fawaz also has provided considerable and much-needed insight into the underlying causes for the sectarian conflict which plagues modern-day Beirut. In a book marked by thorough research and meticulous organization, the author makes excellent use of national and private archives, family papers, oral histories, interviews, and unpublished materials to produce an important study whose greatest value lies in the fact that it is a social and economic, rather than a political, history of this major Middle Eastern city.

Beginning with a concise but complete historical analysis of Beirut and the surrounding region, the author's subsequent discussion of the historic

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regions of greater Syria and Mount Lebanon provides the necessary background for the examination of the main theme of the book. In a lucid synopsis of Beirut's political evolution during the middle part of the nineteenth century, Fawaz shows that it was the Egyptian and the Ottoman decision to establish Beirut as the political and administrative center of greater Syria that ensured the city's place in international and local political and economic affairs. With the city's new administrative status also came the beginnings of European political and economic influence, as French and other European consulates established themselves in Beirut. The author stresses the significance of Beirut's ties with the Syrian hinterland, mainly in the form of the symbiotic relationship which developed between Beirut and Mount Lebanon. This relationship lay at the root of the steady migration which became responsible for Beirut's transformation.

Having established this basic premise, Fawaz then combines detailed data concerning demographic shifts and trends with economic and historical background information to illustrate the impact of regional political developments on the flow of migration to Beirut and the resulting changes in the city's socioeconomic and political structure. With its administrative and economic ascendancy, Beirut was also gaining political stability and security, and it rapidly became an asylum for villagers fleeing disturbances in the Syrian interior. In short, Fawaz shows that the migration to Beirut stemmed not only from the availability of economic opportunities, but also of equal importance, from the advantages of political security and refuge in a city becoming known for its tolerance. The author's emphasis on the impact of local and regional political variables on Beirut's growth is also timely, since it provides a greater understanding of recent events in that city.

The analysis of the population growth resulting from the migration to Beirut necessarily also includes a discussion of the impact of this migration on the city's sectarian composition. For the first time, a Syrian city began to acquire a marked preponderance of Christians over Muslims, one of Beirut's most unique characteristics. In treating this change in Beirut's religious composition, Fawaz challenges the commonly-held assumption that in the nineteenth century Beirut's population — as with the other coastal cities of Syria — was overwhelmingly Muslim from the start. Fawaz begins by examining the period in which the city's Christian population began to increase, using both statistical data and the records and commentaries of travelers of the period to detail the changing sectarian composition of Beirut. Between 1840 and 1865 the number of Muslims in Beirut doubled while the number of Christians tripled, and the numerical equality of the city's Muslims and Christians was effectively ended after 1860, when the bloody sectarian strife which had engulfed the Levant led many embittered minorities to seek refuge in the more tolerant Beirut.

In addition, the reader learns that rivalries among the various Christian sects in the region were often as serious as those between the Christian and Muslim communities. This intra-Christian strife also served as an impetus for the stream of steady migration from the hinterland to Beirut, and was therefore partially responsible for the alteration of Beirut's sectarian composition.

In leading the reader through the complexity of factors underlying Beirut's changes during the nineteenth century, Fawaz ultimately addresses Beirut's transformation from a city in which Christian and Muslim communities lived in harmony to one where the changing socioeconomic and religious composition came to be manifested in sectarian strife. Fawaz handles this subject well, first outlining the socioeconomic gap which developed between Beirut's Christian and Muslim communities, and then turning to the inter-cultural alienation which followed. Beirut's reputation as a city of religious tolerance was earned long before its growth as a port city, and sectarian incidents are rarely noted in local histories. Despite superficial differences between the city's Christian and Muslim communities, the two groups actually shared a way of life based on common social values, local culture, and character traits. This commonality of interests allowed successful economic interaction, and even collaboration, at least until the mid-nineteenth century. Economic cooperation was built on Beirut's reliance on trade and commerce as its main avenue of prosperity. The creation of a native class of merchants and entrepreneurs is particularly notable when viewed against the backdrop of an age of Western imperial domination. Although most people tend to view Europe as the engine of growth for economic development in non-Western areas during the nineteenth century, the author correctly asserts that such an explanation for Beirut's unparalleled expansion is lacking in depth. It also fails to note that the number of European merchants in Beirut actually declined steadily through the course of the century.

However, Fawaz outlines a succession of developments which gradually undermined the basis of common interest between the two communities, which came to view each other as adversaries. Because the majority of Beirut's immigrants were Christians, they benefited more from the city's expanding economic opportunities, and Beirut's changing religious composition came to be associated with a shift in the distribution of wealth among its various religious communities. While the rise of a native Beirut merchant and entrepreneurial class is an interesting result of the city's rise to predominance, it was the inequality of benefits accruing to the two communities comprising this class, Christian and Muslim, which ultimately destroyed the commonality of interests that had allowed them to live in harmony.

The widening socioeconomic gap between the Beirut Christian and

Muslim communities gradually eroded the bases for their harmonious existence. In addition, the Tanzimat orders, administered between 1839 and 1876, made all Ottoman subjects equal before the law, thereby depriving Muslims of the traditional advantages they had enjoyed as members of either the official religion or of the majority. The apparent willingness of the Beirut Christians to adopt Western ways of life added to the growing sense of alienation between the city's communities, as did the memory, on both sides, of the old animosities and tensions which had driven the migrants from the Syrian interior to Beirut. The sporadic outbreaks of hostilities between the now numerous Christian sects within Beirut, including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Maronites, and Presbyterians, only exacerbated the rising tensions within the city. The account of the factional hostilities within the Christian community as a whole is particularly useful in providing an historical basis for understanding the shifting alliances which characterize the Beirut Christian community today. While Fawaz is careful to account for the variety of sources of tension which came to the fore in Beirut, in the final analysis she is clear in showing that sectarianism along Christian and Muslim lines in Beirut was no longer shaped primarily by regional and international developments. Rather, it was based on internal Beirut developments — namely, the increasing economic and, consequently, social and cultural gap between two communities benefiting unequally from urban growth.

Fawaz notes that even on the eve of World War I, sectarianism was still restrained by the existence of some common basis of interest between the city's two major communities. However, the imposition of the French Mandate after World War I and the emergence of a new international order under the Mandate System eventually destroyed the delicate balance, ultimately leading to the present situation in Lebanon.

Professor Fawaz's study of Beirut's nineteenth century transformation and the impact of this growth on its population is an excellent work whose value lies in its socioeconomic and political analysis of this major Middle Eastern city, as well as in its ability to lend valuable historical perspective to modern Beirut's complex problems. Although the predominance of detail occasionally overwhelms the reader, Fawaz does an excellent job of transforming demographic data and socioeconomic statistics into thoroughly enjoyable and informative reading. Overall, Professor Fawaz's book is an important scholarly addition to the field of nineteenth century Lebanese studies, as well as a fascinating exploration of the historical roots of a present-day problem.