

[Book Review] The Clash: A History of U.S. -
Japan relations by Walter La Feber

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The Clash: A History of U.S. - Japan Relations. Walter La Feber. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997. Pp. x + 458. USD \$39.99. ISBN 0-393-03950-1

In the aftermath of the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a number of noted scholars have embarked upon revisiting the state of relations between Japan and the United States. One of these scholars is Walter La Feber, an award-winning historian whose previous seminal works include classical texts on the origin of the Cold War. La Feber poses three central themes in this book.

First, although (with the significant exception of 1931 to 1945) Americans and Japanese have treated each other as partners in East Asian matters, they have also endured phases of love-hate syndrome during their 150-year relationship since Commodore Perry's forcible opening of Japan. A second theme of the book is that the fundamental crux of the problem between Japan and the United States has been their differing perceptions of capitalism. While Japan followed more subtle, informal networks in promoting its economy, in keeping with its compact, homogeneous history, the United States on the other hand opted for a pluralistic, open-ended society, creating a free-market policy beyond its frontier. The third theme is a fusion of the two above-mentioned themes: that is, the focus of the two countries on China. For the United States, opening to Japan was the means through which it would enter the profitable China market. For the Japanese, China provides boundless economic opportunities. The cooperation between Japan and the United States over China was purely strategic as both countries were wary of the Russian empire's advance into North China.

The post-war situation was both a challenge and an opportunity for Japan and for the United States. However, both countries learned divergent lessons from the war: for Americans, that the closed economies (as in Japan and Germany) led to the Second World War and that appeasement (such as the deal made with Hitler in 1938 in Munich) only rewarded aggressors. The Japanese, however, learned an entirely different lesson: that they should never rely on outside powers for capital and that avenues other than military might be explored to enhance and promote economic opportunity in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Japan exploited this opportunity to its advantage during America's war in Vietnam by opening trade relations with the North Vietnamese communist regime and also by providing simultaneous support items to the U.S.-South Vietnamese war effort.

In more contemporary times, the post-1990 phase again witnessed a thaw in the U.S.-Japan relationship. In early June, 1989, during the Tiananmen Square riots, Japanese and American differences over the issue of giving priority to trade over human rights erupted into a public debate. The crisis in the Persian Gulf in 1991 also demonstrated differences in approach between the United States and Japan. Japan refused to reverse its post-1945 anti-military policy and refused to help the U.S. and its allies in the war effort to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Third, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that had ruled Japan since 1955 fell apart into various factions and subfactions coupled with inept leadership and a series of corruption scandals. Fourth, the post-1960 economic boom in Japan slowed down as a result of overspeculation and overregulation by the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). And, finally, the fall of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991 eliminated the common enemy that had helped Americans and Japanese to bury their differences during the Cold War years.

La Feber paints a rather optimistic portrait of the post-Cold War relationship between the U.S. and Japan—a relationship which is likely to blend both the old and the new. The new is the redefinition of their security treaty including American use of the Okinawa base. For Japan, the treaty allows it to depend on the United States for its defense needs to safeguard itself from both real and imagined external threats (especially against a mighty China and a nuclear North Korea).

Perhaps future events will tell whether Americans and Japanese have learned from historical turbulence. For Americans, the challenge will be whether it can accept a resurgent Japan buoyed with economic nationalism while at the same time maintaining its own dominance as the sole superpower in the new world order. For the Japanese, the real test will be whether they have learned to co-opt other Asian economies into their fold by maintaining institutional safeguards without disrupting the social and political order.

This book is a welcome addition to the field of area study specialists. It may be particularly interesting to those who have serious scholarly and academic interests on the state of the Japan-U.S. relationship. The book contains helpful bibliographical references and insightful analysis both at the systemic as well as at the subsystemic levels.

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