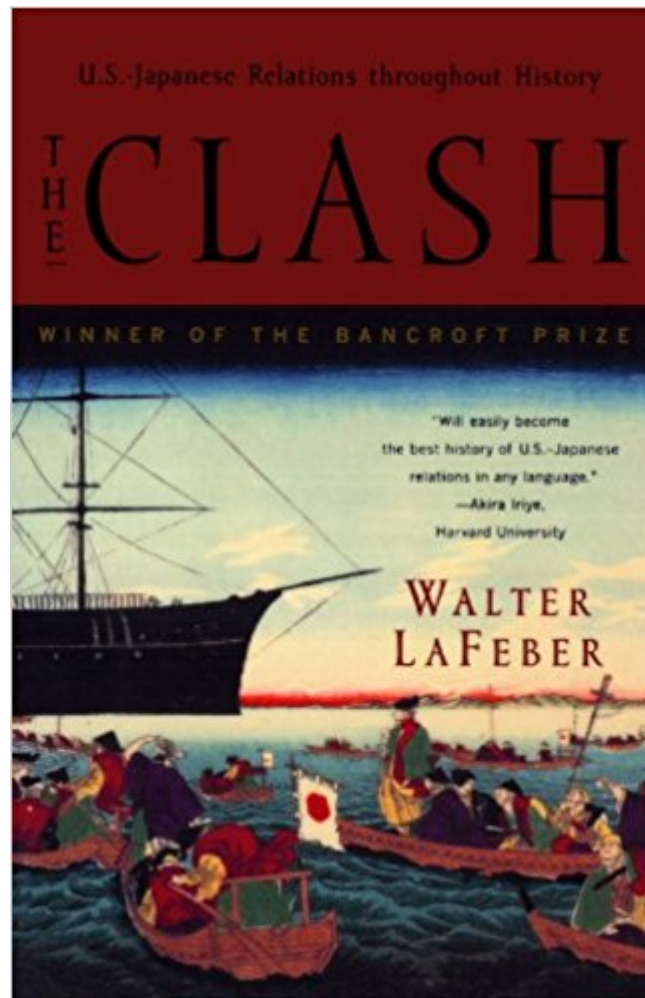




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The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History



Synopsis

Winner of the Bancroft Prize. When Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo harbor in July 1853, opening Japan to the West, a century and a half of economic, cultural, and occasionally violent clashes between Americans and Japanese began. Walter LaFeber, one of America's leading historians, has written the first book to tell the entire story behind the disagreements, tensions, and skirmishes between Japan -- a compact, homogenous, closely knit society terrified of disorder -- and America -- a sprawling, open-ended society that fears economic depression and continually seeks an international marketplace. Using both American and Japanese sources, LaFeber provides the history behind the vicissitudes of rearming Japan, the present-day tensions in U.S.-Japan trade talks, Japan's continuing importance in financing America's huge deficit, and both nations' drive to develop China -- a shadow that has darkened American-Japanese relations from the beginning. "Broad and deeply researched. . . . The Clash is beautifully written, with clear arguments and no irrelevancies." -- Gaddis Smith, Boston Globe "[This] work will easily become the best history of U.S.-Japanese relations in any language." -- Akira Iriye, professor of history, Harvard University "[LaFeber] succeeds brilliantly. . . . [W]ell-researched, meticulously sourced and highly readable." -- Don Oberdorfer, Washington Post Book World Photographs, illustrations and maps

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Walter LaFeber is professor of history at Cornell University and the author of *The Clash and Inevitable Revolutions*.

A fine book from a distinguished historian of American foreign relations. Covering the period from the "opening" of Japan by Perry to the 1990s, Lafeber provides an excellent, detailed narrative of relations between the US and Japan. This necessarily involves discussion of important trends in US and Japanese history. Because of the intended American audience, Lafeber provides a good deal of narrative of Japanese history over this period, and this is one of the strong points of this book. Another strong feature of this book is LaFeber's successful effort to provide an interpretative framework for the narrative with an analysis that emphasizes consistent themes of Japanese-American relations. LaFeber identifies 3 major themes of the continually contentious and periodically violent Japanese-American relationship. One is a consistent American interest in commercial expansion across the Pacific and access to Asian markets, notably the vast market potential of China. Attempting to sidestep European imperial powers, and trying to take advantage of geography and American commercial dynamism, the basic American approach was to pursue an open economic and diplomatic Asian order. The Japanese, with well justified fears of Western dominance, consistently pursued policies aimed at establishing national autonomy, both on the international stage and domestically. Despite widely varying Japanese governments and rather different circumstances, for example, the situations of Japan before and after WWII, this is the second major theme identified by LaFeber. The third major theme is consistent American and Japanese preoccupation with China, both as a potential economic and political actor. Lafeber's narrative nicely lays out the interactions between these basic features of the Japanese-American relationship and specific historical circumstances. Despite starting in a highly disadvantageous situation in the mid-19th century and after suffering a devastating defeat in WWII, it appears that the Japanese have overall been relatively more successful in achieving their basic objectives. LaFeber identifies a number of ironic aspects of this story. In the 1920s, for example, American capital considerably assisted the Japanese industrialization of their Manchurian colony, despite official US policy to discourage Japanese Imperialism. In the post-WWII era, the exigencies of the Cold War led American policy makers to participate in what amounted to the realization of the economic

aspects of the imperial dreams of pre-WWII Japanese policy makers. Japanese aggression in the 1930s, despite apparent success, only increased Japanese economic dependence on the USA. The weakest part of the book, not surprisingly, is the part dealing with the 1990s. Another problematic area is his discussion of Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons. He anticipates Tsunoyoshi Hasegawa's recent arguments but like Hasegawa, tends to downplay the purely military aspects of the decision. LaFeber also never mentions the considerable demographic challenges faced by modern Japan, even though this phenomenon was clearly apparent in the early 2000s when LaFeber was finishing this book. Written very well and with an excellent bibliography, this is an excellent and very readable book.

LaFeber's three-part thesis: 1) that the Americans and Japanese have endured a series of clashes throughout their 150-year relationship, 2) that differing forms of capitalism have been at the root of these clashes, and 3) that the clashes have focused on China, almost works. However, in trying to fit the entire history of U.S. - Japanese relations into a single overarching framework, he underemphasizes the fundamental shift in the Japanese posture following the horrific conclusion to the war in 1945. "The Clash" would more appropriately refer to that catastrophic event. The U.S. decision to rebuild Japan changed the Japanese view of the Americans. The Japanese also abandoned militarism as a means to achieve national goals. These changes represent a fundamental shift in relations between the countries, even though differences relating to their respective forms of capitalism and views of China persist. LaFeber's attempt to paint ongoing differences between the two nations as part of the same "Clash" that led to war fails to emphasize this fundamental shift; his brush is too broad. Even so, LaFeber's work presents a great amount of information regarding the history of diplomatic relations of Japan with the U.S. and is certainly worth reading. His three-part thesis does bring to light ongoing conflict between the U.S. and Japan which might otherwise be overlooked.

As one whose work requires knowledge of contemporary East Asian affairs, I can highly recommend "Clash" for the light that it sheds on past and present U.S. interests and actions in the region. Published in 1997, the book is a bit dated, but Clash does facilitate prediction of future diplomatic, military, and economic relations based upon past crises. LaFeber, who appears to have a slight bias in favor of the Japanese, especially during the American imperialistic era, structures his work by examining U.S.-Japanese relations in three themes, which he continually revisits in his description of the relationship between the two nations since 1850. The first theme is that, despite

the apparent cooperation between the U.S. and Japan during the past century and a half, the relationship has been (and presumably will be) punctuated by a series of crises that severely stress association between the two. Next, LaFeber contends that the economic systems of the U.S. (capitalistic, free-market economy) and Japan (non-capitalistic, government and large corporation controlled economy) are incompatible, and have led to clashes on respective trade and economic policies. Finally, the focal point of all clashes and economic strife between the two revolve around the question of China, regarding both policies of its political disposition and the potential opening of its markets. While addressing these three themes, LaFeber does not ignore the effects on U.S.-Japanese relations of Western imperialism and racism, nuclear proliferation, exploitation of Asia through the use of international law, and power of U.S. business interests in Asia (and how those interests drove diplomacy). Despite the excellent research and structure of this work, it left some room for improvement. Some examples of possible improvements include: (1) LaFeber chose to shift between Pinyin and Wade-Giles for his romanization of Mandarin. This use of two different systems was confusing in a work already overloaded with names of actors from many different nationalities. (2) LaFeber's relation of WWII in the Pacific was fairly amateur. I understand that hundreds of books have been written solely describing that war, and that he was likely attempting to limit overall length, but he could have had a much better description of the war in the space that he used. LaFeber's style is not pretentious and is very readable, somewhat unusual for such a scholarly work. It is also relevant and contributes to an elevated understanding of East Asian affairs. I recommend this work as an entry point for anyone who desires to view Japan or greater East Asia from the standpoint of national security or economics.

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