

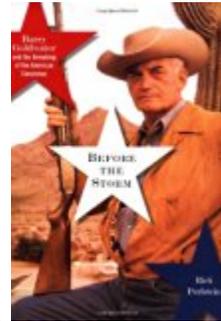
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rick Perlstein. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2001. xvi + 671 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2859-7.

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Rick Perlstein's *Before the Storm* is good evidence that political history can be exciting. Perlstein, a journalist who also writes for *The Nation* and *Lingua Franca*, absorbs the reader with vivid language without abandoning historical sophistication or fidelity to his sources. This narrative history of Goldwater's two presidential campaigns in 1960 and 1964, based on exhaustive research in published primary and secondary sources and significant (but more limited) archival work, is more successful than most in drawing the reader into a sympathetic and complex understanding of its cast of characters, whatever the reader's political bent.

The Goldwater mobilization represented, according to the author, a "tectonic shift" in American politics, one almost completely missed by consensus school historians and social scientists at the time—the "Unmaking of the American Consensus" in the title. Perlstein deftly dares his left and liberal readers to imagine a victory of such a magnitude: "Think of a senator winning the Democratic nomination in the year 2000 whose positions included halving the military budget, socializing the medical system, reregulating the communications and electrical industries, establishing a guaranteed minimum income for all Americans, and equalizing funding for all schools regardless of property valuations—and who promised to fire Alan Greenspan, counseled withdrawal from the World Trade Organization, and, for good measure, spoke warmly of adolescent sexual experimentation." Such a candidate would lose massively in today's political climate, but "if the precedent of 1964 were repeated, two years later the country would begin electing dozens of men and women just like him" (p. xii).

Few historians manage so successfully to get their

readers to transcend their own ideological predilections. To imagine what it must have been like to be a different person (a disagreeable person perhaps), in a different place, is an important antidote to the sort of identity politics that suggests that only members of a group can fully understand their own history. Drawing careful, but imaginative images from the sources, Perlstein takes us into the minds of diverse characters: conservative activists including Notre Dame Law School Dean Clarence Manion, John Birch Society founder Robert Welch, and Republican political operative Clif White; Goldwater confidants such as Denison Kitchel and Stephen Shadegg; and even non-conservative figures such as Lady Bird Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. He also has a feel for the politics of conservative places such as Dallas, and (the other) Orange County, in upstate New York. These portraits, along with his gift for contextualization, should make this book a very useful one for graduate students, who like Perlstein himself, are too young to remember these characters first hand. While the parts of the book that deal with Lyndon Johnson, such as Perlstein's account of the Walter Jenkins scandal, are often gripping, there could be more on Johnson in this volume. Johnson's ad agency, Doyle, Dane, Bernbach, curiously looms larger than LBJ himself.

In one instance, Perlstein crosses the line in his dramatic characterizations, as when he puts an imagined soliloquy into the mouth of Richard Nixon, whom others have often drawn as Hamlet, Macbeth, or Lear—making him possibly one of the most overly-Shakespeareanized politicians in American history (p. 88). Perlstein "chooses" Hamlet: "Now we come to the key question—what should the answer be?" Unfortunately, this seems insufficiently Shakespearean (or Nixonian). But most

of the time Perlstein's rhetorical devices enhance rather than obscure a scrupulous interpretation of the sources. Indeed, his resume of Nixon's resentment when faced with last minute challenges at the 1960 Republican convention (quoted in the next paragraph) reads almost like a beat poem of the period.

"[Nixon] had been working for this moment, cringing for it, bowing and scraping for it, since—since when? Since he was denied the chance to go to Harvard because he could only afford to live at home; since he was blacklisted from Whittier College's one social club because he was too poor; since he was reduced to sharing that one-room shack without heat or indoor plumbing with fellow students while working his way through Duke Law and finished third in his class; since he begged Los Angeles's plutocrats, Navy cap in hand, for their sufferance of his first congressional bid, since he trundled across California in his wood-paneled station wagon to bring his Senate campaign 'into every county, city, town, precinct, and home in the state of California'; since he was forced to plead cloth-coated poverty on television to keep his spot as vice-presidential candidate in 1952; since his vice-presidential career was interrupted every off year when he hit the road to campaign for other Republicans, pounding whiskey in the back rooms when his companions pounded whiskey, drinking juice in church basements when his companions drank juice. Richard Nixon: collector of chits. And now, when it was finally time to call them in, would the whole thing disintegrate before his eyes?" (pp. 80-81).

Unlike most other liberal or radical writers, Perlstein seems to have genuine empathy for many of the conservatives he writes about, while retaining his ability to criticize both Republicans and Democrats. Nor does he fall into the self-serving smugness of histories written by some of the participants in the period. He makes his readers share the exhilaration and enthusiasm of the early Young Americans for Freedom, without sparing them from criticism for the same consumerism and narcissism as some of their New Left opponents, as suggested by their "adolescent" adoration of William F. Buckley, Jr. He highlights Buckley's own observation at the time of YAF's "appetite for power" (pp. 105-109, 372). He demonstrates the unfairness of the concerted efforts of the Johnson campaign advertising that Goldwater (if elected) would blow up the world. Instead, Perlstein convincingly argues that Goldwater said little that could not be found in the apocalyptic cold war rhetoric of JFK (pp. 150, 338-350, 466).

Far more sympathetic to Goldwater voters than to the Senator himself, Perlstein attributes the weakness of the 1964 campaign to the candidate's reluctance, provinciality, and even laziness. After the 1960 Republican convention, which marked his emergence as the standard-bearer of the conservative movement, Goldwater did little to help organize the movement or to put its ideals into legislation. Instead, Goldwater "spent more energy that winter organizing a congressional wing of the Air National Guard, the 9999th Air Reserve Squadron. He was never one for legislating; his business was casting 'no' votes" (pp. 138-39). The Arizona senator's mistrust of Easterners and people he didn't know led him to put the 1964 campaign under the management of old friends like Denison Kitchel who lacked contacts and experience, while freezing out experienced Easterners like Clif White (pp. 256-58). Perlstein shows that while the idea of Goldwater created unprecedented enthusiasm, the man himself was intellectually lazy, ill prepared, a bad speaker who was remarkably indifferent to his own candidacy; he then contrasts these qualities with Ronald Reagan's in the same campaign. Here, however, he is surely too kind to Reagan, whose repeated delivery of "the Speech" was probably more intellectually lazy than Goldwater's genuine, if ill-considered, spontaneous remarks (pp. 418, 509-11).

Unlike many journalists and popular historians, Perlstein engages with ideas current in the academy, though the book's strength is most often in the support it gives to particular interpretations that have already been advanced. With the exception of his stimulating, but not entirely convincing discussion of Goldwater's complex relation to segregationism, there is little here that will rock the seminar room. For example, Perlstein's attack on Richard Hofstadter, Seymour Martin Lipset and the consensus school for their ham-handed attempts to marginalize American conservatism is more devastating than similar barbs launched by others, but is not new (pp. 103, 453). While Perlstein recognizes that the real change wrought by the Goldwater campaign came at the grassroots level, this campaign history is mostly about political elites. For an account of the social history of the grassroots, precinct-level organization of the conservative movement, or the impact of changing notions of gender on it, readers should consult Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), which Perlstein draws upon in its dissertation form.

One of the great historical and moral questions raised by the Goldwater movement is its responsibility for the

racial polarization of the party system and this book makes some interestingly nuanced, but only partially persuasive arguments about Goldwater's racial attitudes. Goldwater received only six percent of the African American vote. Besides his native Arizona, Goldwater carried only states in the Deep South. Eight years earlier, Eisenhower had carried the African American vote. Was the Goldwater campaign a coded appeal to segregationists, and did the Senator himself promote such an appeal?

Perlstein suggests that Goldwater slowly converted to southern views over the course of the campaign, but in trying to prove this is excessively charitable to Goldwater on civil rights. Relying on accounts by two of his southern campaign coordinators who met with Goldwater (just before he went to the floor to explain his vote against the Civil Rights Act of 1964), Perlstein characterized the Senator as "a shaken man afraid he was signing his political death warrant. Goldwater was convinced (by fellow Arizonan William Rehnquist and Yale law professor Robert Bork) that the Constitution offered him no other honorable choice," yet a no vote clearly was in his political interest (p. 363). On the other hand, when George Wallace asked for the second spot on the Republican ticket, a huge political temptation given that an independent Wallace candidacy would doom Goldwater's chances, Goldwater rejected the Alabama governor's bid, perceiving him, in Perlstein's words, as nothing but a "racist thug" (p. 376).

The subtle pressure of political advantage, squarely in line with an almost century-long tradition of lily-white Republicanism, surely influenced Goldwater as much as the philosophical arguments of Bork and Rehnquist; and Perlstein, in taking stock of the senator's internal contradictions, is letting both Goldwater and his campaign off the hook. Many observers, including Goldwater, seem to have recognized at the time, as a California Goldwater leader put it obscenely, that "the nigger issue will put him in the White House" (p. 374). Goldwater himself admitted that the party had to adopt a southern strategy in order "to go hunting where the ducks are." At the same time, always weak intellectually, Goldwater never noticed how closely his speeches matched the majority's language in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (pp. 341-42).

Perlstein perceptively observes that as the campaign

wore on, with Goldwater's warmest welcomes in the land of legal segregation, "he seemed to be shedding his discomfort with the Southland's peculiar institutions" (p. 432). However, Perlstein never matches his criticism of the authoritarian management of the Republican convention, and the subsequent purge of the Republican National Convention, with the fact that among the purged was the African American remnant within the Republican organization. This was a far more significant event in the racial polarization of the party system, than the moment he suggest: JFK's phone call to Coretta Scott King on the jailing of her husband in 1960, which in turn sent Nixon courting southern white votes (p. 137, 370). Nixon's white southern votes came, however, mostly from New South suburbanites, and he still received more than a third of the African American vote nationally. This was a continuation of a "southern strategy" that went back to William Howard Taft. Goldwater's votes came mostly from black-belt whites, and his campaign had hoped to harness a "white backlash" in the North that did not materialize in great numbers until 1968. The damage of the purge, and the transparent appeals to segregationism, were lasting—no Republican presidential candidate since has gotten more than twelve percent of the African American vote.

Before the Storm, the best book yet written on the crucial Goldwater campaign, is a product of the new understanding that the literary and political theory of the last twenty years have brought to the way in which historians construct texts. The putative dissolution of the boundaries between history and fiction has understandably raised objections when texts depart too far from their sources, as in the controversy over Edmund Morris's infamous *Dutch*, though plainly many historians need more understanding of the ways in which rhetoric, genre, and other literary concepts shape their work. *Before the Storm* remains faithful to the historian's three-fold obligation: to report the essence of the way things happened, to give historical agents a "sympathetic understanding," and the too often neglected goal of providing readers with a superb literary product. Though a great read, *Before the Storm* is a very long book, and some of the literary pyrotechnics that make it distinctive thin out in the last hundred pages. Nonetheless, Perlstein's achievement is considerable, both historically and stylistically.

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