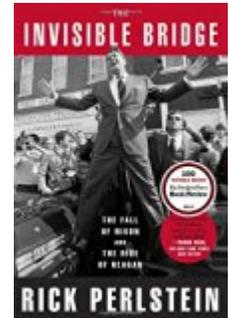


Rick Perlstein. *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. 880 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4767-8242-3.



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I am grateful to Rick Perlstein for the three massive, excellent books he has released since 2001, which together reconstruct in intricate detail the volatile political culture of the 1960s and '70s. Unlike the first historical treatments of this era, which were written by scholars who participated firsthand in its tumult, the most recent literature is the project of those (such as myself) who experienced these years only as small children or through popular nostalgia. Perlstein, born in 1969, was hardly a political agent in the era under his magnifying glass. Yet in part because he eschews the dominant norms of the historical profession—choosing grand synthesis over microhistory, tales of “great men” over history from “the bottom up”—Perlstein paints a uniquely thrilling and vivid tableau, linking presidential politics to developments ranging from the box-office success of *Jaws* (1975) to the abduction of Patty Hearst to the panic over meat prices to the rise of est (Erhard Seminars Training).

Perlstein's research is stunning. Notwithstanding the fact that his notes are available only online (an inconvenience, but at nearly nine hundred pages, the book is already physically unwieldy), these citations reveal that even minor details rely on a labor-intensive consultation of multiple sources. Perlstein's method, novel in relying heavily on Google's enormous collection of newly digitized newspapers, is noteworthy. Google has archived full-page newspapers, as opposed to Proquest, which is based on keyword searches and summons specific articles divorced from their original layout. The act of reading full-page newspapers rather than deracinated articles can inspire illuminating insights about lived experience easily overlooked given the potential pitfall of tunnel-vision historical inquiry. Historian Mary L. Dudziak, author of the acclaimed *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2001), remarked in a lecture at Stanford University that part of her inspiration to bring together the hitherto divorced historiographies of civil rights and the Cold War was her simple discovery,

through reviewing entire newspapers, that American people and policymakers were reading headlines about desegregation and foreign policy at once, and crafting their policies and worldviews accordingly. The historical panoramas offered by *The Invisible Bridge* are far richer for this approach.

Beyond depicting with unprecedented color the particular trajectory from Richard Nixon's fall to Ronald Reagan's rise, does *The Invisible Bridge* offer a new historical interpretation? For the most part, no. Perlstein subscribes to (and helped establish) the reigning analysis of this era—that it is primarily defined by the "rise of the Right," of which Reagan is the familiar and genial, if now more fully fleshed out, poster boy. Though Perlstein acknowledges that the New Right first existed primarily "in the streets and the hollers" rather than in the halls of government throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the central thrust of his narrative is charting how Reagan amplified these hollers until they reverberated with sufficient volume to carry him to the presidency (p. 322).

Late twentieth-century politics—most pundits, scholars, and culture warriors on both sides of the aisle can agree with Perlstein—was certainly defined by division. Mining sources from yearbooks to letters to oral history, Perlstein ably portrays how Reagan's coming-of-age, and most important, the stories Reagan told about his youth, consolidated the black-and-white view of the world he would promote so successfully as a politician: his father may have been a forgettable alcoholic, but his mother was "saintly" (p. 36); hot, often lonely, summers receded into a backdrop for Dutch heroism as a life-guard. The lowest-stakes local football game was a chance to recount a dramatic standoff between good and evil, Reagan learned as a magnetic sportscaster, honing the kind of redemption narratives he first encountered in the beloved Horatio Alger novels scorned by the cynical "suspi-

cious circles" who would abet Nixon's downfall before becoming Reagan's greatest detractors.

What is strange, however, is that Perlstein's close interpretation of Reagan's life as an explanatory mechanism for his political persona stops short after a similarly deep dive into his Hollywood years. Beyond the late 1950s, perhaps to make the case that Reagan was attaining national notoriety, Perlstein draws most of his evidence for the polarizing political climate from locations far from California, though Reagan presided as governor from 1967 to 1975. The hotspots in the educational culture wars Perlstein invokes are the embattled bus routes of Boston and the (literally) explosive classrooms of Kanawha County, West Virginia, where Far-Right activists resorted to guns and bombs to protest the adoption of a controversial textbook. This is a curious narrative decision, as Reagan was directly involved in, and helped foment, similarly intense (if less well-known) educational battles that likely influenced his political identity more explicitly.

Explosives did not fly over education only in West Virginia. In April 1969, when Governor Reagan took the stage at a state conference for bilingual education, he addressed a public increasingly radicalized by the Chicano movement. Activists exploded firecrackers around the governor and ignited several small fires in wastebaskets near the stage. Ever the "athlete of imagination" Perlstein describes, Reagan continued to speak until activists clapped and chanted in Spanish so loudly they drowned him out (p. 31).[1] By 1971, Chicano activists vilified "Lord Reagan" for cutting bicultural-bilingual programs, solidifying his super-patriotic public image. Similar passion infused controversies over California's implementation of nationally acclaimed sex education programs. In 1968, Reagan declared that these curricula signified the "moral crisis into which [California was] descending" and convened, along with his fellow conservative, Superinten-

dent of Public Instruction Max Rafferty, the Moral Guidelines Committee. Reagan and Rafferty stacked the committee with their appointee picks and entrusted it with what Reagan called the "single-most important task before California": crafting moral guidelines for its massive, and ever more diverse, school system.[2] These, and dozens other such examples, would only make Perlstein's case more energetically.

In all fairness, these incidents transpired a few years before the central scope of *Invisible Bridge* (and Perlstein does note the intensity of the sex education battles in *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* [2008]). But these issues and their development also raise pressing questions about the totality of the rightward turn symbolized by the Reagan revolution toward which Perlstein's narrative builds. The Moral Guidelines Committee by 1970 had split into a conservative and a progressive faction. The liberals, surprisingly, were led by none other than Reagan's personal pastor Donn Moomaw of Bel Air Presbyterian, who had flipped sides when he realized, "we are coming into a whole new decade of morality in the 1970s." [3] That "new morality" was akin to the worldview of the "suspicious circles," not that of an ascendant populist Right. In 1974, the California State Board of Education adopted the liberal "Moomaw document" that espoused critical thinking and the liberal notion that America, particularly on questions of racial and social equality, had far from fulfilled its founding ideals. The guidelines prepared by the conservative faction railed against "secular humanism" and celebrated an undiscriminating patriotism—and were roundly rejected by the committee and board, to Reagan's dismay. By then, Rafferty was not there to help the governor pick up the pieces. After losing the superintendency to liberal African American Wilson Riles in 1970—one mother wrote, "I knew we were moving to the left but I had no idea how far or how fast"—Rafferty had relocated to Al-

abama to work for George Wallace. Riles went on to win three terms, ultimately promoting, by popular mandate, a very different educational agenda under Democratic governor Jerry Brown than the agenda Reagan and Rafferty had imagined.[4]

Was Reagan's imagination so limber and his Manichean worldview so unstinting that he was unaffected by these signs that his redemption narrative might not be as linear as a Horatio Alger tale? I think it is unlikely. Perlstein acknowledges Reagan's disgust at the "ultra-professional patriotic organizations that can eventually wreck our school systems" in the 1950s as well as his well-known early identification as a New Deal Democrat (p. 385). Indeed, as late as 1967, Reagan still earned rage from the Far Right for "creating" "the Mexican-American" by signing into law a pro-bilingual education state measure.[5] I hope that in his next book, Perlstein will, in his inimitable way, shed more light on the progressive and liberal strands that coursed through the period, and even the people he has helped define by their conservatism.

Notes

[1]. Tom Newton, "7 Fires Set: BILTMORE ARSON," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1969, 1.

[2]. Minutes of the California State Board of Education, July 11, 1968; and Open letter, from Governor Ronald Reagan to Moral Guidelines Committee members, April 25, 1969, both in Box F3752:437, Folder: Moral Guidelines Committee, 1968-1969, Department of Education, California State Archives..

[3]. Jack McCurdy, "Morality Code for Schools Goes to State Board," *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 1970.

[4]. Mrs. Margaret Christiansen to Max Rafferty, December 1, 1970, Box F3752:748, Folder: General Correspondence, August-December 1970, Department of Education, California State Archives.

[5]. John Steinbacher, *Bitter Harvest* (Whittier, CA: Orange Tree Press, 1970), 67.

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