



America in the 70's

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Rick Perlstein is a writer from the political left who wants to know why, in America in the 60s and 70s, the growing conservative movement was not taken seriously by the liberal establishment. At the time, most pundits agreed with the assessment of leading political scientist Warren Miller, who argued that the rapid social change of the period meant 'both parties would be wise to move their ideological centres of gravity in a liberal, left-of-centre direction'.

Perlstein has been grappling with the rise of American conservatism for some time. In his 2001 book *Before the Storm*, he explained the rise of Barry Goldwater to the 1964 Republican presidential nomination and subsequent general election defeat.

In 2008, *Nixonland*, the second volume in the series, covered the social upheaval of the Vietnam



era and the electoral success of Richard Nixon.

In *The Invisible Bridge*, Perlstein tells the story of the years from 1973 to 1976—a period in which, as per the sub-title, Nixon certainly fell. Yet it was less clear that Ronald Reagan had risen.

Reagan did come close to winning the Republican Party nomination in 1976, only losing to incumbent President Gerald Ford on the floor of the convention by 1187 votes to 1070. At the time, however, this was commonly viewed as the end of Reagan's political career, for, as the *New York Times* commented, Reagan was 'too old to consider seriously another run at the Presidency'.

Of course, Perlstein's readers know that Reagan went onto triumph in 1980 and thus understand why Reagan is the main character in this book, and not Ford, nor Democrat Jimmy Carter who actually won the Presidency in 1976. It is why the narrative of the book is interrupted by chapters which provide a biography of Reagan from his childhood, youth and time in Hollywood.

The fact that Reagan did not win in 1976 means that Perlstein has not yet had to provide a definitive answer to his question about how the conservatives triumphed when the progressives of the era were so dismissive of the possibility. However, in this volume he shows us where the seeds of the conservative revival were starting to flourish and along the way provides vivid descriptions of the economic, social and political malaise which seemed to be overwhelming America in the mid-1970s.

There was the crisis in national confidence engendered by the failure in Vietnam and Watergate, a scandal which seemed to symbolise all that was rotten with the political system. At the time, it was quite logical to assume that both would contribute further to a leftward shift in politics and society.

The author makes much of the fact that Reagan made less effort than most other Republicans to distance himself from Nixon over Watergate. Perlstein clearly sees this as a black mark on Reagan, but also acknowledges that this stance did him minimal political harm. While Perlstein emphasises the lack of distance over Watergate, one can also see glimpses of the areas where Nixon and Reagan were furthest apart and it was these that were to have far more lasting significance.

One was Reagan's scepticism about détente. Another was the fact that Reagan regularly talked about the size of government being a problem— clearly not something that had ever concerned the Nixon Administration.

In 1971, Nixon had expanded government control of the economy by imposing price and wage controls. In contrast, Reagan regularly made the case for smaller government. Perlstein cites a meeting in 1973, where state governors were asked about the main national priorities. The common answers related to the environment, planning, and transport, but Reagan said it was 'to halt the trend toward bigger, more expensive government at all levels before it is too late'. As Perlstein comments, it was as if Reagan was speaking from 'a different political planet'.

However, as Perlstein demonstrates, the common answers from 1973 seemed a bit facile by 1976. It became apparent in the intervening years that the Keynesian economic consensus, which had been in place since the Second World War, no longer had easy answers for fixing the economy. Even before the oil price shock following the Arab-Israeli war in late 1973, the cost of items such as meat was skyrocketing. By 1975, inflation seemed out of control but the economy was growing at negative 5 per cent. A new word was coined—stagflation—to describe the situation where there was stagnation and inflation at the same time, which—according to the prevailing consensus—was impossible.

The response from much of the political class was to propose even more of the same type of Keynesian policies. For instance, Republican legislator Jacob Javits and his Democrat colleague Hubert Humphrey proposed setting up an Office of National Economic Planning, which would submit six year plans to regulate areas of the economy such as factory production. However, as Perlstein documents, many others, even Nixon's Treasury Secretary John Connally, began to have second thoughts and started using more pro-market rhetoric. Reagan's voice seemed not to be so extra-terrestrial after all.

A key part of the book's appeal is its use of social history which, in a similar manner to Dominic Sandbrook's works about Britain in the 1970s—reviewed in the May 2013 edition of the *IPA Review*—Perlstein links to the political crisis of Watergate and the economic crisis of stagflation. The popular culture of the period featured horror movies such as *The Exorcist* and *Jaws* and people began joining all manner of weird self-help and spiritualist schemes, such as transcendental meditation and scientology. One of the strangest, which Perlstein describes, was 'est'. It involved paying \$250 for weekends where participants were not allowed to eat, drink, or go to the toilet for twelve hours while instructors screamed abuse at them.

For many at the time, 'American morality seemed all but to disintegrate', as social mores changed rapidly and crime rates soared. To illustrate the sense of social chaos that many Americans felt, Perlstein cites a single day's stories in the *Milwaukee Journal* which cover kidnappings, bribery, and purse-snatchings from old ladies. Perlstein observes that what made the sense of chaos even more pervasive was that 'crime and social movements seemed almost to merge', underscored most graphically by the case of the heiress Paddy Hearst. She appeared to be a victim of crime when kidnapped by the radical leftist Symbionese Liberation Army, but then became a perpetrator when she turned up seemingly happy to rob banks with her captors.

With Watergate, stagflation, crime, horror movies, and wacky social movements, there seemed to be no place in mid-70s America for the sunny optimism of a Reagan. Perlstein writes cynically about Reagan spinning tales of doubtful veracity to show that things always work out for the best in the end. He also paints Reagan's personal behaviour in a negative light, describing him exaggerating achievements, bedding Hollywood starlets, and having dysfunctional relationships with his children.

However, Perlstein also genuinely seeks to understand how Reagan was able to garner so much support. He recognises that Reagan was a 'political genius'. An example he provides comes from

when Reagan first stood to be Governor of California in 1966, a time when it was fashionable to take a benign view of campus militancy. Reagan's own advisers, armed with some of the most advanced opinion polling then available, told him that as someone perceived as an anti-intellectual, he should definitely avoid criticising students. However, Reagan instinctively understood that mainstream America hated campus violence. As Perlstein comments, 'one of the things at which brilliant politicians are better than mediocre ones is smelling new public concerns over the horizon before they are picked up by polls'.

As well as its focus on the battle between Ford and Reagan in the Republican primaries, *The Invisible Bridge* also explains how Carter got the Democrat nomination despite being such a demonstrable phoney. Perlstein describes how the crisis of confidence in institutions, triggered by Watergate, had created a situation where normal positives for prospective candidates, such as extensive experience in Congress, were negatives in the 1976 campaign.

As he ranges across his subject, Perlstein finds developments on the Right which were scarcely noticed at the time and that have failed to be fully appreciated since. He introduces his readers to General Electric executive Lemuel Boulware, 'the most influential American most people have never heard of'. Boulware's mission was to make all the company's employees, and the communities in which they lived, supporters of capitalism. Perlstein analyses such seemingly obscure matters as the battle over school curriculums in West Virginia and explains how this was a key foundation issue for the Heritage Foundation.

The Invisible Bridge has been a controversial book in the United States, with many conservatives taking issue with Perlstein's treatment of Reagan. Reagan biographer Craig Shirley has accused Perlstein of plagiarism and there have been complaints that the book is not sufficiently scholarly. Many readers, including this one, have not appreciated the decision to put the endnotes online rather than at the back of the printed volume.

However, this is an eminently readable and informative book. Perlstein's writing style has become more assured in each volume of the series and so one can only await with anticipation the next instalment. In it, as the ever-optimistic Reagan would have predicted, the good guys might finally win. Not that Perlstein will be celebrating.