

Nixon as culture warrior

Tom Switzer reviews

Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America

by Rick Perlstein
(Scribner, 2008, 881 pages)

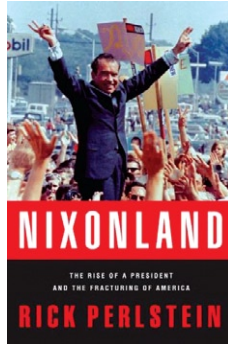
Richard Milhous Nixon was born into a modest, working-class Protestant family. He worked at his father's service station. In his 20s, he studied law at university and worked as a solicitor at a commercial law firm. Elected to the national legislature, in his mid 30s, he quickly became a senior member of government and was viewed as a politician on the rise. But at 49, Nixon suffered a devastating political loss—written off by the media as yesterday's man.

In his early-to-mid-50s, Nixon endured a long period in the wilderness before making a remarkable comeback. And at 56, he led his right-of-centre party to power during a time of economic uncertainty and national division over social and cultural issues.

As the nation's leader, Nixon was marked as an apostate by the high priests of the media and universities. He was accused of using the 'dog whistle' to send subtle signals that appealed to the prejudiced in the community. He alienated the metropolitan sophisticates who took it upon themselves to represent the conscience of the nation. Above all else, he represented a threat to the prevailing leftist political and cultural landscape.

For Australians, this is an eerily familiar story. But there are clear differences between John Howard and Richard Nixon.

For one thing, the Australian Prime Minister had thicker skin and a better temperament than the highly insecure and slightly erratic American President. Listen to the riveting Nixon tapes on



YouTube, even Howard haters would be hard-pressed to accuse their nemesis of talking in such a vulgar and paranoid manner behind the scenes. Howard's long period of public service, moreover, was defined by consistent philosophical convictions, even in the face of widespread public opposition—think of Iraq, the GST, Telstra privatisation and industrial relations reform. Nixon, on the other hand, was a relentless political opportunist: anti-communist hard man one decade, realist exponent of detente the next; free-marketeer who preached the virtues of small government, but also an unashamed Keynesian who presided over big government. Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson spoke for many in 1956 when he said of Nixon: 'This is a man of many masks. Who can say they have seen his real face?' And, oh, another big difference: Howard's career did not end in disgrace.

Still, if you swap the Liberal leadership loss in 1989 for the Californian governorship loss in 1962; 'Lazarus with a triple bypass' in ruling out any comeback for 'You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore'; 'Howard Battlers' for 'Nixon Democrats'; 'Mainstream Australia' for the 'Silent Majority'; 'cultural dieticians' for 'Ivy League elites'; 'Doctor's Wives' for 'effete snobs' and you have the subject and theme of Rick Perlstein's important book *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*.

The Perlstein thesis, which has attracted praise from both Left and Right

in the US, is this: from the 1964 Democratic landslide victory to the 1972 Republican landslide victory, Nixon exploited America's anxieties and unrest in the service of consolidating his own political base and realigning the political landscape. Nixonland consists of two irreconcilable groups of Americans, whom Perlstein dubs Franklins and Orthogonians. Named after two university fraternities that represented polar opposite positions during Nixon's college days, the Franklins were the well-connected, condescending insiders on campus; and the Orthogonians the resentful outsiders and little guys who faced adversity from the outset. In this narrative, Franklins are the sophisticates in the media, arts and universities; Orthogonians the silent majority of Middle America. Needless to say, Nixon, 'a serial collector of resentments', was drawn to the latter.

With LBJ's election in 1964, the nation was 'more united and at peace with itself than ever.' But within the next eight years, America 'plunged into chaos.' At the extreme, Perlstein argues, members of these two groups of Americans killed one another or tried to kill one another, most often in cold blood. The Watts riots of 1965, the anti-war protests, drugs, sex education, juvenile delinquency, rising crime, the spreading counterculture, Klansmen, hippies, Weathermen, the Black Power movement, the white New Left—these events and characters were part and parcel of the era.

They also provided a political opening for a calculating (and hitherto washed-up) politician from California. Nixon's genius, Perlstein argues, was to direct populism—the white backlash—against the Franklins who controlled the Ivy League universities such as Harvard, as well as elite liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times*. He ruthlessly used cultural issues to drive a wedge between the Orthogonians—patriotic, culturally conservative, salt-of-the-earth and hard-working Democrats—and their

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increasingly Franklinitic party under George McGovern. (In the Australian context, think of how Howard reached out to the Battlers, disoriented by decades of radical economic and social change, who revolted against Paul Keating's increasingly elitist Labor party.) According to Perlstein, Nixon set the scene for the culture wars that persist to this day.

So, what is one to make of all this? Well, notwithstanding Perlstein's many strengths as an insightful historian who combines a narrative wit with an encyclopaedic grasp of political affairs, there are problems with his thesis.

First is the contention that Nixon presided over a political and cultural realignment, that he ended the post-depression FDR coalition of northern liberals and southern segregationists, that he presaged the rise of a new conservative hegemony in Washington, and that he seeded the ground to a long-running culture war that continues to divide America. Some of this is true, but Perlstein seriously overstates his case. Although Nixon talked like a conservative populist, he walked like a liberal. Indeed, what he liked to say of Disraeli's political philosophy—that 'a sound conservative government' consists of 'Tory men and Whig measures'—could have been said about his own governing agenda from 1969 to 1974.

Remember: Nixon was the first President to embrace affirmative action, mandating its extension to women as well as blacks. Both federal spending and regulations grew faster than they had under LBJ and Hubert Humphrey. He created a mass of green measures (Clean Air Act) and state agencies (Environmental Protection Agency). He set price and wage controls, in what was America's most concerted attempt to impose state control of the economy since the war. He even proudly boasted he was Keynesian, a claim anathema to

most conservatives who were increasingly embracing the free-enterprise ethos of Milton Friedman and the Chicago school. Even John Kenneth Galbraith called Nixon a socialist! Perlstein ignores or at least downplays all of this.

Remember, too, Nixon's conduct of international relations. His stress of Kissingerian realpolitik, which drained American foreign policy of its Wilsonian idealism, aggravated many conservative brethren. It was Nixon, much to the chagrin of Cold Warriors, who sidelined anti-communist Taiwan, opened relations with Red China and secured—gasp!—detente with the Soviets.

If Nixon had indeed remade the American landscape in a more conservative image, how does Perlstein account for the widespread hostility towards the president within his own ranks? William F. Buckley Jr, founder and Editor of *National Review*, complained that America, under Nixon, had 'lost—irretrievably—any remaining sense of moral mission in the world.' 'Nothing Nixon did surprised me anymore,' lamented 1964 GOP presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. 'He had contradicted himself so often that I was beginning to expect it.' Nixon was a 'devious and singularly unsatisfactory leader,' according to leading right-wing columnist William Rusher, who 'seemed to almost enjoy traducing every conservative position with which he had come to be identified in the course of a quarter century in politics.' Not much red meat there. (It is worth pointing out that Howard, far from alienating his supporters, consolidated his base during his nearly 12 years in power.)

Another problem with Perlstein's thesis is his argument that Nixonland lives on. 'Do Americans not hate each other enough to fantasise about killing each one another, in cold blood, over political and cultural disagreements?' he asks. 'It would be hard to argue they

do not. How did Nixonland end? It has not ended yet.'

But the intensity of the violence and paranoia from the mid 1960s to the early '70s is surely alien in today's America: a nation which now has a liberal black President, whose immediate predecessor—the most divisive and ideological president in history, we're told—promoted more minorities to his cabinet than any of his predecessors and who purged the remnants of Dixiecrats from the Republican party (recall George W. Bush's call for then-Senate majority leader Trent Lott to step aside in 2002 after his badly framed pro-segregation, pro-Strom Thurmond remarks). This is a nation, remember, that has not had a white male Secretary of State since the mid 1990s and that has witnessed the rise of a big black and minority middle class. Nixonland, the nation of dog-whistle politics, widespread violence and anger, one where politics is vicious and psychological, no longer exists.

Herein lies the fundamental difference between Nixon and Howard. Contrary to Perlstein, Nixon did not realign the American landscape; that task was left to Ronald Reagan several years later when he, in cahoots with anti-communists, supply-siders and social conservatives, smashed the FDR coalition that defined the post-1933 political order.

Howard, on the other hand, did remake his nation in his image. So much so that the only way that Kevin Rudd and the Labor party could win in 2007 and consolidate power was by copy-cattling the conservative PM's political agenda. Could perhaps a refined version of the Perlstein thesis, one that puts less stress on a psychodrama and more emphasis on conservatism's idea-driven ascendancy, be applied to Howardland?

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