

Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*

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THE GREAT DIVIDER

Both candidates in the 2008 presidential campaign have trumpeted their zeal to reach across the partisan divide and forge consensus—Obama giving diffuse sermons about national unity, McCain claiming to be a maverick in order to sell himself to ‘independents’. The endless mantras of ‘change’ and ‘hope’ rely on the assumption that America is bitterly divided, as never before. The reality is, of course, that a vast majority of Americans are united in despising George Bush, and in feeling that their country has been hijacked by neo-cons and billionaires. But superficial as such campaign boiler-plate may be, it rests on a deeper-lying myth of a lost golden age in US politics, when the twin horsemen of divisiveness and faction were tightly corralled.

The purpose of Rick Perlstein’s insufferably long book is laid out on its first page: to explain how ‘the battle lines that define our culture and politics’ were set between Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory of 1964 and Richard Nixon’s mirror victory in 1972. Across its 800-plus pages, it provides a ponderous chronicle of the eight years supposedly responsible for today’s Red–Blue polarization, with Nixon appearing as both emblem of the transformation and chief culprit. ‘What Richard Nixon left behind was the very terms of our national self-image: a notion that there are two kinds of Americans’—on the one hand the ‘Silent Majority . . . the middle-class, middle American, suburban, exurban and rural coalition’, designated by Perlstein in the end as Republicans; on the other ‘the “liberals”, the “cosmopolitans”, the “intellectuals”, the “professionals”—“Democrats”’.

Perlstein is frequently cited these days by middlebrow political commentators in the US as someone with his finger supposedly on the pulse of history. A self-identified left-liberal Democrat—useless though such terms are as

political locators in a talk-radio grading system that slots Teddy Kennedy in as a Spartacist—Perlstein contributed a long and rather laboured essay for the Summer 2004 issue of the *Boston Review* on what the Democrats should do. It added up to a vague call for return to some sort of FDR programme. *Nixonland*, then, offers historical grounding for these sympathies; appropriately enough, its title comes from words spoken by Adlai Stevenson on the campaign trail in 1956:

Our nation stands at a fork in the political road. In one direction lies a land of slander and scare; the land of sly innuendo, the poison pen, the anonymous phone call and hustling, pushing, shoving . . . This is Nixonland. America is something different.

Nixon, so Perlstein's thesis runs, was the Capability Brown of American postwar politics, completely reshaping the landscape—though Ronald Reagan comes a close second in his divisive impact. Perlstein invites us to scrutinize the era through two lenses, rather like the spectacles Reagan wore at political rallies—one lens to focus on the crowd, the other to read the speech before him on the lectern. When looking closely at Nixon, Perlstein can be relatively clear-eyed, particularly on the formative years of this weird, messed-up Californian. It was at Whittier, a Quaker college, that Nixon made his essential discovery in the early 1930s. Whittier had its elite, 'a circle of swells who called themselves the Franklins . . . and who were well-rounded, graceful, moved smoothly, talked slickly. Nixon's new club, the Orthogonians, was for the strivers, those not to the manner born, the commuter students like him.' Nixon figured correctly that for every stylish Franklin there were a dozen Orthogonians. There was his Silent Majority, and he later made his political name playing the Orthogonian card, most famously against the upper-class State Department official Alger Hiss, whom the freshly elected Congressman from California accused of being a Communist spy and got sent to prison for perjury. Perlstein is also capable of evoking Nixon's political antennae, supersensitive to the fears and resentments of those who felt threatened, patronized, passed over in a turbulent time.

Perlstein's larger historical focus, however, is near glaucoma. His narrative chugs through the late 60s and early 70s, offering scenes that are drearily familiar from the scores of contemporary accounts cited in his many pages of footnotes. The result is prolix, bland and humdrum. The style is indescribable. Here is a sample, from his account of Nixon's response to a newspaper column by Roscoe Drummond suggesting that he needed to de-escalate in Vietnam, otherwise 'popular opinion will roll over him as it did LBJ':

At which Nixon thundered upon his printed news summary . . . ‘Tell him that RN is less affected by press criticism and opinion than any Pres in recent memory’. Because he was the president *most* affected by press criticism and opinion of any president in recent memory. Which if known would make him look weak. And any escalatory bluff would be impossible. Which would keep him from credibility as a de-escalator; which would block his credibility as an escalator; which would stymie his ability to de-escalate; and then he couldn’t ‘win’ in Vietnam—which in his heart he didn’t believe was possible anyway. Through the looking glass with Richard Nixon: this stuff was better than LSD.

Nor is Perlstein’s grasp of fact much better. Of the 1969 Altamont concert played by the Rolling Stones outside San Francisco he writes, ‘Hells Angels beat hippies to death with pool cues’. No hippy at Altamont died in this fashion. One of the Hells Angels, Alan Passaro, did stab to death Meredith Hunter, a black man who had drawn a revolver; Passaro was later acquitted on grounds of self-defence. Perlstein also claims that George Bush Sr, in his losing congressional race in Texas against the Democrat Lloyd Bentsen, said that if Bentsen wanted to run to the right of him he would have to fall off the planet. It was actually Bentsen who said this—an altogether sharper political anecdote. The most vivid words in *Nixonland* come from Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s vice president and the man assigned the task of ratcheting up the angers of the Silent Majority to maximum volume. This he did in sentences mostly crafted for him by Nixon’s speechwriters, Pat Buchanan and William Safire, who handed Agnew such mock-heroic lines as: ‘The troglodytic leftists who dominate Congress . . . work themselves into a lather over an alleged shortage of nutriments in a child’s box of Wheaties.’

Perlstein reserves his own rhetorical venom for radicals, portrayed as the inspirational villains who enabled the creation of *Nixonland*. The book displays a consistent dislike of leftists, casting them as culpable provocateurs of right-wing backlash or scooting past them with a quick glance, when not omitting them altogether. A determination to drop them down history’s oubliette would explain Perlstein’s extraordinary and otherwise baffling omission from his vast bibliography of Andrew Kopkind, by far the best journalist the American left produced in the 60s and 70s, and one who wrote many brilliant essays precisely on Perlstein’s themes. But Kopkind was a genuine radical, unlike Perlstein or the writers Perlstein cites as his heroes. Paul Cowan, for example, a colleague of mine in the 1970s at the *Village Voice*, scuttled away from radicalism as quickly as other *Voice* journalists of that period like Clark Whelton, who later became a speechwriter for Mayor Ed Koch. Even as Cowan became increasingly focused on his own Jewish roots, he developed a concern for white ethnics in mutiny, the topic of many of his articles. They mirrored the explicit denunciations of ‘radical elitism’ by writers like James Fallows, who built his early career on positive

accounts of those who did not dodge the draft, for such neo-lib roosts as the *Washington Monthly* and the *Atlantic*. What united all these writers was hostility towards any political stance indicating active sympathy and support for Third or Second World opposition to the American empire.

A regular contributor to the *New Republic* and Salon websites, Perlstein is no loose cannon on the ideological deck. His writing never betrays the faintest hint of heterodoxy. His differences with the Right are tactfully expressed and his judgements mostly genteel. Like the editor of the *Nation*, he wrote warmly about the late William Buckley Jr after the passing of that apex swine. On the other hand, Perlstein's hostility to the radical or socialist Left extends beyond the pages of *Nixonland*: a recent interview with the libertarian periodical *Reason* referred to the 'juvenile and destructive Abbie Hoffman'. (The tone mellows instantly when Perlstein moves on to George Wallace: 'there was a genuine economic populism in a lot of what Wallace said.')

But on other occasions it can be difficult, like trying to haul oneself out of the sea via a smooth rock covered with seaweed, to get a firm purchase on Perlstein's actual positions. His previous tome, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (2001), depends like his new one on back projection of some mythic past when the nation was united. But today, in his interview with *Reason*, he is capable of writing:

There's a certain kind of cultural energy pursued by the gatekeepers of elite discourse, who want to argue that Americans fundamentally agree with each other and that's the health of the nation . . . when people describe the Kennedy assassination as an eruption of violence with no precedent in American culture; when people say Barry Goldwater lost because he 'dared to question the American consensus'; when you have liberal pundits basically not seeing the coming backlash against liberalism when the evidence is right in front of their faces—what's in operation, I think, is an understudied, underexamined American discomfort with conflict.

Is this Perlstein's real view? If so, he would have been better advised to put quotation marks around the final word in the title of his book on Goldwater; but perhaps his publishers told him that pandering to an imaginary golden age of social harmony is the way to sell books. That allows him to wring his hands over the present. The closing sentences of *Nixonland* have an appropriately apocalyptic timbre: 'Do Americans not hate each other enough to fantasize about killing one another, in cold blood, over political and cultural disagreements? It would be hard to argue they do not. How did Nixonland end? It has not ended yet.'

What are we to make of this? Of course, the American landscape is rent by the vast fissures of race and class. Politicians were aware of them long before Nixon was born. Hillary Clinton manipulated the same constituencies and the same fears as Wallace did, back in the late 1960s. The major

card in John McCain's hand features the colour of Obama's skin. But the contours have changed all the same. These days the blue-collar workers from the industrial unions who beat up the anti-war hippies in the late 60s wear ear-rings and long hair, use weed and meth, drink cappuccino and buy Chardonnay as well as Budweiser. Their unions fade in strength from year to year. Blue-collar America is far lower in the water. The largest demonstrations last year were not against the Iraq war, which a high percentage of Americans oppose, but those conducted by immigrants. Nixonland is an iffy proposition these days. Many of its former residents face foreclosure and a search for new abodes.

Such considerations of political economy are alien to Perlstein. The political mission of *Nixonland* is pretty clearly to set the stage for a candidate of liberal consensus and healing, who has since happily materialized in Barack Obama. It goes without saying that if the Illinois senator were actually to propose altering the distribution of income and wealth in America, the heavy artillery would come out against such 'divisive' rabble-rousing. Yet consensus—the wrong kind, naturally—has come through the fires of divisiveness. In late September, after an avalanche of phone calls to Congress had denounced Treasury Secretary Paulson's planned \$700 billion bailout at a rate of 99 to 1, the Republicans in the House of Representatives, along with 95 mutinous Democrats, rejected the plan—controverting the injunctions of both the Republican and the Democratic candidates. Both McCain and Obama—the latter heavily freighted with Wall Street advisers and campaign contributions—supported the bankers' coup, consummated in Congress on October 4. Invoking bipartisanship, Obama declared that he would have to delay envisaged social spending programmes, and emphatically nixed suggestions that he use the moment of maximum negotiating leverage before the Senate vote to insist on regulatory reform, or relief for beleaguered homeowners rather than banks.

Progressives, perennially on the alert for the arrival of Stormtroopers on Main Street, have seized on Governor Sarah Palin as Nixonland's new suzerain, distracting themselves from the unpleasant reality that it was the Democrats and their ticket that pushed through the bail-out. The US Treasury will now superintend a wave of foreclosures and evictions, amid the landscapes that nourished the young Nixon. Fertile opportunity lies ahead for right-wing populism. Perhaps the Boudicca of the Backwoods will be reborn in years to come as America's echo of Poujade.