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Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan, by Rick Perlstein.
Simon & Schuster, 880 pages, \$37.50



RICK PERLSTEIN, A CONTRIBUTING writer at the *Nation* magazine who was once the chief national correspondent for the *Village Voice*, probably did not expect conservatives to enthuse over his debut book, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (2001). In fact, William Kristol praised it in the *New York Times Book Review*, saying Perlstein told the Goldwater story with “journalistic flair” and “justice,” while George F. Will called it “the best book yet” on the Goldwater phenomenon. By 2008, however, Will wrote for the *Times* that Perlstein’s second book, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, was replete with “jejune incongruities,” “adolescent language,” and factual weaknesses.

Little surprise, then, that the *Times Book Review* did not assign a conservative to review Perlstein’s latest sequel, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*. The assignment went instead to the paper’s former theater critic and op-ed columnist, Frank Rich. Selecting that writer, whose hatred of conservatism dominated his reviews as well as his columns, had the intended effect: Perlstein’s chronicle of the middle three years of the 1970s is, Rich opined, “a Rosetta stone for reading America and its politics today.”

Like both Rich and the *Times*, Perlstein never doubts his liberal presuppositions and

the resulting contempt for conservatives. It would be a mistake to evaluate *The Invisible Bridge* merely by its partisan purposes or its disputable details and interpretations, however. Partisan histories play a useful role. Perlstein, an able narrative stylist, deserves some credit for reviving the kind of spirited partisan history that defined Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s career. There’s nothing flat about any of Perlstein’s books, which cannot be said of the many other contemporary liberal historians who disguise their ideological leanings through deliberate blandness.

MORE IMPORTANT IS WHAT PERLSTEIN’S ambitious, multi-volume project represents. Many liberals have made peace with conservatism, and with Ronald Reagan in particular, giving him a measure of serious respect. Perlstein wants to resume the war.

Consider Richard Reeves, the liberal journalist who summarily dismissed Reagan before, during, and immediately after his presidency. Yet in the mid-1990s Reeves began to change his mind, writing,

I was no fan of Ronald Reagan, but I think I know a leader when I see one, even if I do not want to follow where he is leading.... He was a man of con-

servative principle and he damned near destroyed American liberalism.... Reagan...was larger than he seemed, indeed larger than life, even if our historians do not quite get it yet.

By 2005 Reeves would publish a mostly favorable account in *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*. John Patrick Diggins, a neighbor, friend, and ideological soulmate of Arthur Schlesinger, made the case in *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (2007) that Reagan deserves to be considered among the greatest American presidents alongside Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. And Princeton’s Sean Wilentz, while remaining generally critical (he thought Reagan deserved impeachment over Iran-Contra), nonetheless acknowledges his accomplishments: “His success in helping finally to end the cold war is one of the greatest achievements by any president of the United States—and arguably the greatest single presidential achievement since 1945.”

There have been a few attempts from the Left to cut Reagan down to size, such as Will Bunch’s *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (2009) and William Kleinknecht’s *The Man Who Sold the World: Ronald Reagan and the Betrayal of Main Street*

America (2009). These and similar efforts attack Reagan's record with wonky arguments about wealth distribution, social policy, civil rights law, and other campus concerns. But neither book caused so much as a ripple in political-literary circles.

The most recent liberal argument, used to gain leverage against Barack Obama's conservative tormentors, is that "Reagan was not a Reaganite!" Rather, he was a cryptomoderate who would be unacceptable to the Tea Party and too conciliatory to win the Republican nomination if he were on the scene today. To believe this you'd have to believe that both John McCain and Mitt Romney were more conservative *and* more politically skillful than Reagan, and that the Tea Party faithful who lionize Reagan don't understand him nearly as well as the hosts at MSNBC.

THE LEFT IS RIGHTLY CONCERNED about the Reagan legacy. If the Republican Party, or a future presidential standard-bearer, could figure out how to emulate the Reagan formula—rather than just invoke Reagan's name—liberals would find themselves in deep trouble again. *The Invisible Bridge's* stridency reflects Perlstein's wish for a Left as assertive and confident as the post-Goldwater Right. Obama was supposed to be the Left's Reagan, after all. Though his policy agenda has tried to move the country in a liberal direction as decisively as Reagan moved it rightward, his presidency hasn't catalyzed a *political* change as pronounced as the one Reagan triggered. (At least Reaganomics, unlike Obamacare, was popular.) Above all, Democrats haven't been able to shed vestiges of Reaganism (like hostility to tax increases) that permanently hamper the leftist cause, a point implicit in Perlstein's preface. His book is well timed: the Left's growing anger toward both parties may well erupt in the 2016 campaign in ways not seen since 1968.

Perlstein aims to revive liberals' categorical anathema on Reagan. Dismissing him as an "amiable dunce" won't do, nor will the policy wonk's statistical scorn. Instead, Perlstein depicts a complex and cunning Reagan: a calculating fabulist whose political intention and effect were malign. Rather than correcting or mitigating Nixon's malicious divisions in public opinion, Perlstein's Reagan intentionally deepened them. Perlstein seeks to reclaim Reagan's earlier reputation as a controversial figure, calling him a "divider," not a "uniter." Unlike Nixon's resentments against the establishment, which arose from his character (explored in *Nixonland*), Reagan's resentments were against reality itself, arising from the

heroic fantasy world that he began to develop in his youth. Reagan was "an athlete of the imagination" and also "an athlete of denial"—indeed, an Olympian gold medalist of denial.

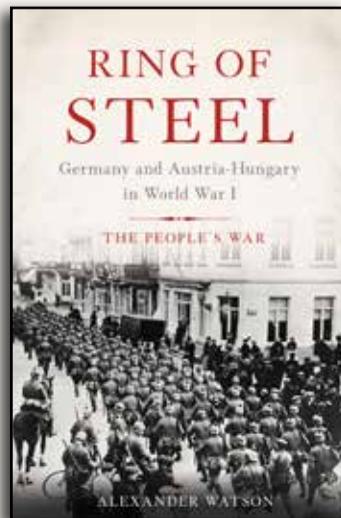
REAGAN'S GREATEST OFFENSE, PERLSTEIN thinks, was to make it unnecessary, and then impossible, for Americans to come to terms with the meaning of their country's weakened, demoralized condition after Vietnam and Watergate. America might have pondered its manifold sins at home and abroad in order to fashion "a new definition of patriotism" from the abundant material made available during the upheaval of the 1960s. *The Invisible Bridge* offers few particulars about this new patriotism, however—extolling it as "a perfect passion for the rule of law, of the fairest possible proceduralism, a longing for political innocence" clarifies nothing—nor does Perlstein describe the process of national introspection that would have forged it. The reader is left to infer that Reagan prevented America from becoming the kind of country Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn could finally be proud of. In any case, Reagan's romantic optimism and standard-issue American heroism foreclosed all such possibilities: "Then along came Ronald Reagan, encouraging citizens to think like

children, waiting for a man on horseback to rescue them: a tragedy."

Worse, Reagan's one-dimensional American patriotism has polluted the Democratic Party as well as the Republican. (Perlstein's stream-of-consciousness meanderings draw upon an endless inventory of phrases, but he never types the words "American exceptionalism," though it's what he's really denouncing.) He laments, for example, that exceptionalism of the sort voiced by Reagan turned up at the 2012 Democratic National Convention: key-noter Julian Castro, Michelle Obama, and her husband all affirmed that the United States is "the greatest nation on earth." This "cult of official optimism," Perlstein thinks, amounts to "hubris." It is the chief reason Americans find it impossible to overcome our "paralyzing" polarization, in order to address climate change, competition from China, stagnant economic growth, and other aspects of "the national apocalypse that may yet come." (Strangely, Perlstein leaves health care off his list of polarized, unsolvable problems. Maybe he thinks it's all but fixed.)

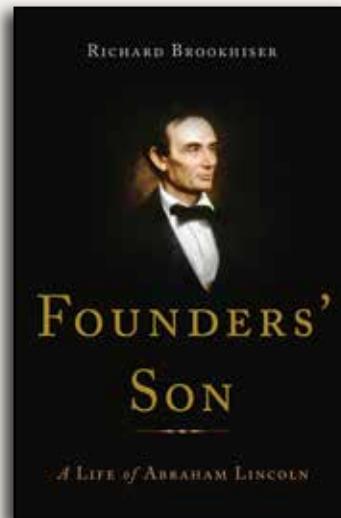
The Invisible Bridge is really just an oblique version of the current liberal conceit that everything would be fine if conservatives would stop being so stupid, stubborn, and vicious, and admit that liberals have been right all

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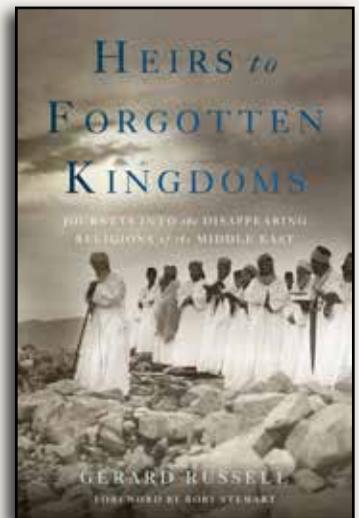
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along about pretty much everything. To work from that smug premise to the conclusion that conservatism's fundamental problem is hubris betrays a startling lack of self-awareness by liberals. Perlstein's belief that one man can cause this hubris all by himself is even more bizarre. It is tempting to conclude from Perlstein that Reagan was in fact greater than conservatives imagine. Sam Tanenhaus has argued that Perlstein's narrative implies contempt not just for Nixon and Reagan but for the majority of Americans who sided with them. "For Perlstein," he wrote in the *Atlantic*, "the mere fact of a President Nixon is explicable only as pathology." The only exceptionalism that impresses Perlstein is Americans' exceptional ignorance or weakness for the demagogic rage of the Right. Ultimately, *The Invisible Bridge* is an argument less against Ronald Reagan than against the American character that Reagan exemplified and fortified with his rhetoric and statecraft. While Perlstein blames conservatives for this state of affairs, he'd surely be as disenchanted with Franklin Roosevelt's America if he'd been a contemporary.

IT IS EASY TO LOSE SIGHT OF PERLSTEIN'S central argument in the tsunami of details that inundates the reader from the first pages. Indeed, his book doesn't really

build an argument for his thesis; he intends that you will acquire it by reverse osmosis. An ocean of details exhausts and distracts the reader, evidence of a relentless malice that dissolves all subtlety. Do we really need five pages about the meat boycott of the spring of 1973? We do when you can make a minor tie-in to the fact that Governor Reagan invested in a cattle-related tax shelter, and as a child wrote his first surviving letter about the tastiness of meat. And let's not forget that America's fondness for red meat can be used as a metaphor for our supposed bloodthirstiness. (The effect of Nixon's wage-and-price-control regime in disrupting the meat market goes unmentioned; as does its role in the energy crisis, which begins during this same time period; as do the deeper policy aspects of many episodes that obsess Perlstein.) He returns often to the meat boycott story like a bird returning to carrion on the road, though chiefly for comic purposes. Nixon's consumer adviser made the foolish suggestion that "liver, kidney, brains, and heart can be made into gourmet meals with seasoning, imagination, and more cooking time." Eminently mockable, no question—but Perlstein's book is full of these vignettes as setups for his punch lines. They're the equivalent of what standup comedians call "runners": images or

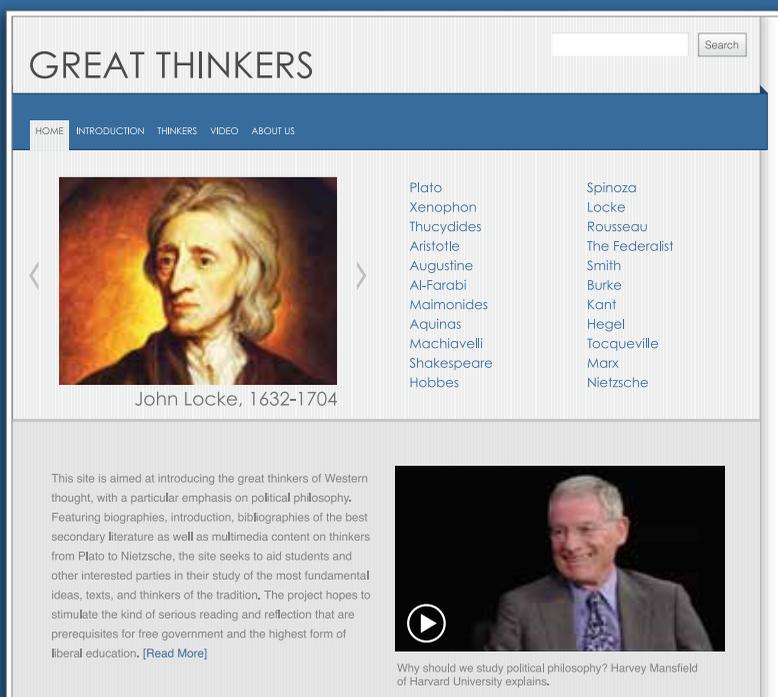
gags that you repeat as an anchor for the set piece.

The author isn't just playing for laughs, though. Like *The Daily Show's* jests, Perlstein's serve to highlight American hypocrisy, venality, corruption, and imbecility, all the more offensive to liberal sensibilities for being wrapped in pretensions of exceptionalism. (Perlstein is especially annoyed with Reagan's repeated quotation of Pope Pius XII: "Into the hands of America God has placed an afflicted mankind.") What other kind of country could fall for someone like Reagan?

Unfortunately, Perlstein is less talented than Jon Stewart at being derisive without coming across as bitter and mean. The laughs disappear completely in his treatment of the POWs returning from North Vietnam, rendering incredible his pose as a social historian merely outlining our era's polarization. *The Invisible Bridge* opens with a long deconstruction—worthy of Chomsky—of "Operation Homecoming," the national celebration of the American POWs' return from North Vietnam. Though often relying on the words of others to criticize the prisoners and the publicizing of their return, Perlstein makes clear his sympathy for the idea that they were war criminals, not heroes, whose treatment by the North Vietnamese amounted to nothing

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more than the same kind of “enhanced interrogation” the U.S. practiced at Guantanamo Bay. Of Jane Fonda’s denial that POWs were tortured and her advice that they should be regarded as “professional killers” who were “hypocrites and liars,” Perlstein says in his own voice that “plenty of ordinary Americans thought what she said made sense.” It’s highly doubtful, however, that even a majority of the historically small minority of Americans who voted for George McGovern in November 1972 agreed with “Hanoi Jane’s” attack.

SEE WHAT I DID THERE? LAY DOWN A track of critical quotations and circumstances, and then append my own sarcasm and snark. It’s Perlstein’s favorite literary device. Of Reagan’s youthful desire to make the football squad despite his skinniness, he writes: “A good thing he was scrawny, or he would never have acquired the character it took to be strong.” Or of the famous episode of an early-teen Reagan dragging his intoxicated, unconscious father out of the snow: “A good thing his father was passed out drunk, or else Ronald Reagan would not have had the opportunity to come of age.” Perlstein is coy about whether he is merely contesting the authenticity of Reagan’s self-understanding. In the context of this and his previous books, Perlstein’s real argument is against the American archetype of the self-made man. It’s as if he wishes to scream at Reagan, *You didn’t build that!*

Perlstein’s predominant method of cutting Reagan down to size is to flag Reagan’s factual mistakes and prevarications. One of the easiest tricks of polemical writing is to array a politician’s petty contradictions and logical shortcuts into a brief against him. The larger and more colorful a politician, the easier this method becomes. FDR and John F. Kennedy are easy marks, LBJ is the mother lode, and Perlstein takes note of Jimmy Carter’s self-serving prevarications and exaggerations. This is not a new mode of Reagan criticism, though Perlstein’s tendentious use of Reagan’s slips has the effect of making the earlier treatments by Robert Dallek and Garry Wills—liberals who were equally hostile to Reagan in, respectively, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (1984) and *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (1986)—seem temperate and judicious by comparison.

Reagan’s frequent misstatements of facts and idiosyncratic rendering of circumstances is hardly unique among politicians. Sometimes it catches up with them, as it did with Al Gore in the 2000 campaign. And sometimes it doesn’t: Bill Clinton claimed to recollect local black churches being burned in his childhood, though a check of the record re-

vealed none had been torched where he grew up. The discovery didn’t hurt Clinton because churches really were burned in the South, and the larger political and social truth counted for more than pedantic accuracy. Americans tend not to care much about perfect factual accuracy if they think you are correct about the underlying issue.

IN ADDITION TO NEVER CREDITING REAGAN for the many times when his facts and analysis of an issue were correct, Perlstein seldom looks beyond a mistake to ask if Reagan wasn’t onto something serious. Perlstein never discusses Reagan’s long-running theme of the 1970s: many prominent aspects of contemporary American government—the administrative state—are constitutionally dubious. (Perlstein’s unseriousness about this subject is best seen when he mangles some basic separation-of-powers issues in his account of Watergate.) Instead, he serially picks on Reagan’s gaffes. For example, he scoffs at Reagan’s criticism of the Food and Drug Administration because he had his facts completely wrong about a particular tuberculosis drug, ignoring entirely the substance of the long-running controversy about the character of the FDA bureaucracy and the consequences of its regulatory rulings.

That Perlstein perceives little or no ground for reasonable criticism of the administrative state can be seen in an August comment on his Facebook page: “Not quite ready to forgive Cass Sunstein for his work advancing the deregulatory work Reagan launched.” Even Sunstein, the Obama Administration’s “regulatory czar,” doesn’t pass muster. Or consider a Perlstein article in the *Nation* this year, in which he responded to a query: “Who on the right does the best job of covering politics or the economy or anything else, for that matter, in a thoughtful, fair and accurate way?” Perlstein wrote that no one does, since conservatism offers nothing better than the “hustlers, haters, hacks, and conspiratorial lunatics at Fox News.” For someone who sneers at Nixon and Reagan for dividing the country and demonizing political opponents, Perlstein either doesn’t realize that he does this constantly in his own writing, or exempts himself and his allies out of the belief that rules are for other people.

Perlstein’s obliviousness to the deeper substantive dimensions of the political divides taking shape between 1960 and 1980 can be seen in his treatment of economic issues. He notes in the briefest possible way that Keynesian economics stopped working in the 1970s, but evinces no interest in examining why this happened, and offers no account of the critiques and alternatives people of any persua-

sion put forward. For all his copious research in popular and original source material, there is no evidence that Perlstein spent any time considering serious academic literature (not even Cass Sunstein, apparently) about the major political issues he discusses. Nor is there any acknowledgment that liberalism experienced some bad innings in the 1960s and 1970s, or that some of its difficulties resulted from attacks by the New Left as well as by the Right.

PERLSTEIN HAS ACHIEVED THE EXTRAORDINARY feat of producing a book that is both richly detailed and completely superficial. *The Invisible Bridge* ends abruptly with Reagan’s hardly “impromptu” speech on the last night of the 1976 Republican National Convention, and the widespread assumption that it marked the end of his political career. Perlstein promises a sequel, presumably taking us through the 1980 election and reviving the head-scratching question leaders in both parties asked in the aftermath: “How the hell did this guy get elected?”

Most Americans of all political vantage points have long since stopped asking that question. Perlstein wants to revive it, along with the withering hatred and contempt for Reagan that was its premise. For this we should, in a way, be grateful. Rick Perlstein’s contempt for his subject represents a clear rejection of Barack Obama’s conceit that the discord between Red and Blue America is all a misunderstanding that can be resolved through good sense and good will. Perlstein is unlikely to persist and offer a similar large-scale account of Reagan’s presidency. Though posturing as the Gibbon of our age, he more closely resembles Theodore White—adept at telling the horse-race story of a political campaign, but hopelessly out of his depth when it comes to seriously assessing an actual presidency.

The Invisible Bridge takes its title from a comment Nikita Khrushchev made to Nixon: “If people believe there’s an imaginary river out there, you don’t tell them there’s no river there. You build an imaginary bridge over the imaginary river.” Perlstein doesn’t need to explain his interpretation of this: American exceptionalism is an imaginary thing, bolstered in its dying innings by a man given wholly to imaginary politics. But because of this book’s superficiality about political life, liberals who thrill to it may find that a more recent metaphor is a better fit: a bridge to nowhere.

Steven F. Hayward is the Ronald Reagan Distinguished Visiting Professor at Pepperdine University’s Graduate School of Public Policy, and the author of *The Age of Reagan* (Crown Forum).

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