

**Lance Kuntzman**  
**TAH Paper**  
**Fall 2010**

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

I. Author's thesis:

Perlstein's thesis is a powerful one: That between 1964 and 1972, a cultural and political transformation occurred that still shapes our nation today.

II. Use of evidence:

Plentiful. Perlstein's book is over 700 pages in length with over 80 pages of footnotes. The book is rich in detail-most examples are vivid and in many cases, heartbreaking. The evidence to support the thesis can be broken down into two main categories-political and social changes.

Politically, the US was transformed between 1964 to 1972. The United States went from a period that was "the most hopeful times since Christ was born in Bethlehem" (82) to one that was wracked by violence and an increasing sense of generational alienation (641) and a sense of "American cacophony" (84). Between these eight years, there was a voting transformation-from liberalism to conservatism.

In addition, Perlstein thoroughly details the racial tension and violence that leads many people to move towards a more conservative end of the spectrum. One such example is the gubernatorial race in California between Edmund Brown and Ronald Reagan. Under Brown, the state had flourished (72). With protests and disorder, and the perception that Brown could not restore order, Reagan won a landslide in 1966.

With the rise of Reagan and conservatism, you also had the rebirth of Richard Nixon, the central character in the book. Perlstein presents him as someone who is torn by a desire to do good, especially on the global stage, but hindered by his Achilles Heel—a willingness to do anything to achieve and maintain power. The chapters on the Nixon campaign of 1968 and 1972 could stand as a book on their own. It chronicles how Nixon rehabilitated his image and rode the seismic shift in political trends all the way to the White House. Most gripping was the chapter that detailed the White House and CREEP effort to secure reelection in 1972 (630-640). While political dirty tricks are an American tradition, it seems people working on behalf of Nixon manipulated the Democratic candidates in 1972.

In addition to political transformation, social transformation occurred as well. It is hard for this reader to separate both, as one impacted the other. For example, race riots, starting with Watts, seemingly turned Americans towards more conservative political candidates. Some whites felt they were being denied their rights (77).

Some of these social trends were heart wrenching, unbelievable or both. From inner city protests, to campus protests, to counter protests to the devastation of the war in Vietnam, to the Weathermen and Black Panthers—Perlstein details it all. In fact, Nixonland is dedicated to all of those who died in the strife during this timeframe. Probably the most significant one was the war in Vietnam. Americans were lied to over a number of years about this conflict. By the time the Pentagon Papers were published, Americans knew

there was no legitimate reason for supporting South Vietnam (570-577). In fact, Perlstein argues the war was continued on because of domestic politics (577). In an example of vindictiveness, the Nixon White House went out of its way to smear Daniel Ellsberg, the man who released the Pentagon Papers, and portray him as mentally ill.

III. Does the author prove his thesis?

Yes, in painstaking detail. Again, the book is over 700 pages with an accompanying 80 plus pages of footnotes. The book shifts seamlessly back and forth between characters and events, weaving one great narrative. It was a highly readable survey of the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s. In the beginning of the book, Perlstein says that “America was engulfed in a pitched battle between the forces of darkness and the forces of light” (xii). While making only one specific direct link to current times, red and blue states, many other examples DO exist. We still have racial division, politicians willing to divide Americans to gain political office, changing social mores and a somewhat unpopular military conflict (thankfully not on the scale of Vietnam). While some might call the conservative era we live in the Age of Reagan, it more likely is still the Age of Nixon.

IV. What have you learned?

As a student of history, this era is fascinating. From readings, especially the Theodore White books on the 1968 and 1972 elections, I knew a fair amount about the politics of the time. However, Perlstein provided rich

vignettes about how Nixon won both times-especially how CREEP manipulated the 1972 Democratic primary process, leaving McGovern alone because he was perceived to be the weakest candidate. In addition, I did not know how radicalized college campuses had become. Yes, I knew about student protests, but not the 'Silent Majority' type of students who counter protested. I would say I knew the grand narrative, but Perlstein provides the detailed story.

V. How will you incorporate what you have learned into your teaching?

When I teach this era, I now have a rich source of excerpts I can use with students to illustrate the chaotic nature of the era. For example, in demonstrating how Vietnam divided the nation, I could use cases of violent protest within the United States (80-82). Another example would be in teaching the elections of 1968 and 1972. The book provides rich detail of how the turmoil of the era spilled over on to television during the nominating conventions of both parties, but especially the Democrats (307-314). While not the final thread in the book that I could use, a final example here would be Nixon. If I were to have students evaluate Nixon and his years in the White House, I would probably include examples of his environmental and welfare plans and his successes in China. Then, I would have them evaluate the 'darker' aspects of his presidency.