

## Primary Sources

### Rick Perlstein on Garry Wills

**Eyal Press:** From [Public Books](#) and [Type Media](#), this is Primary Sources, the show where writers and intellectuals talk about some of the greatest influences on their work. I'm Eyal Press.

My guest today is the historian Rick Perlstein. Rick is the author of a series of books on the rise of the American right, sprawling works of narrative history that are both rigorously-researched and highly entertaining. Among them is *Before the Storm*, which examines the band of conservative activists who spearheaded Barry Goldwater's failed 1964 Presidential campaign, and *Nixonland*, which chronicles how Richard Nixon exploited the backlash to the 1960s to forge a powerful new brand of conservative politics.

On today's show, Rick talks about another historian who has deeply influenced him: Garry Wills. Wills is the author of more than fifty books, on subjects ranging from Augustine's Confessions to John Wayne to Ronald Reagan. Like Rick, Wills began his career as a journalist and never received a PhD in history.

In our conversation, Rick and I talk about the qualities he most admires in Wills, among them his unpredictability and his lack of deference to power. We also discuss the importance of morality in both their work, and how Rick's views of the conservative movement have evolved over time.

Just so you know, there will be moments where background noise can be heard during our conversation, as is sometimes unavoidable when doing remote recordings in a pandemic.

**Eyal Press:** Rick. It's great to have you here on Primary Sources. When did Garry Wills first start to matter to you?

**Rick Perlstein:** That's an interesting question. I think it must have been pretty quickly, because I left graduate school and moved to New York in August of 1994, and I have a very strong image of moving to an apartment on Prospect Park Southwest, right by Prospect Park, and before I'd done anything else—gotten a job or maybe even unpacked—climbing up into a tree at Prospect Park with his book *Lead Time*, which is a collection of his journalism in the sixties, and basically anointing my vocation by reading that book as something that I was there to do.

**Eyal Press:** So let me get this straight, you left graduate school in history. Is that right?

**Rick Perlstein:** Well, I was actually in the program in American Culture at Michigan. I was coming out of the University of Chicago; I didn't know how to do anything. I was barely an adult, and all I knew from the University of Chicago was how to read books and think. But basically, the process at graduate school was me realizing that I wanted to write for a broader audience.

**Eyal Press:** So I'm imagining you come across Wills, you're in that tree or wherever it is—by the way, it's very interesting to hear you say Prospect Park as a place where a graduate student in

New York could actually live...

**Rick Perlstein:** Right. Exactly. I'm so old that I was paying like, \$400 a month for rent or something like that.

**Eyal Press:** I did the same thing. I lived in Park Slope and I paid \$400 a month. But getting back to Wills. This is a transition you realized in graduate school: you don't want to write a monograph for a small group of academic scholars, you want to write for the public. Is that right?

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah. I could definitely say that before Garry Wills was one of the role models, other people were doing the same thing—basically journalistic essayists from the sixties. People who wrote in a tradition—the cliché is new journalism, whether that's a useful category or not. By the time I was interested in creating a literary career for myself, they were not only my role models, I ended up writing about the same thing they wrote about, which was the sixties. So in a lot of ways there was this weird kind of double-helix going on.

**Eyal Press:** Well, let me push that one step further because in, *Before the Storm*, your first book, which is this incredibly gripping account of the 1964 election that Barry Goldwater loses disastrously and leads the pundits to declare conservatism dead, and you show is actually the birth of the new right, and the conservative movement. But in that book, you make passing mention of Wills, because he was one of the young writers recruited to work at Bill Buckley's *National Review*. Given all of that, I wonder if you went and interviewed Wills for that book?

**Rick Perlstein:** Well, that was a little bit later. So actually Garry Wills, he really pops up in all different ways, in all different directions in this matrix. He's also a subject or a character in probably all four of my books. Either he's writing about something or he's representing an intellectual trend. So yes, he did start his career writing for the *National Review* and thought he was probably a conservative. Of course, before that he escaped from seminary with only the suit on his back, so we want to talk about that, too.

**Eyal Press:** He was nearly a priest, yes?

**Rick Perlstein:** He was nearly a priest, like so many interesting people were like John Kerry and Fidel Castro. I had an idea once to write a book about people who grew up—and now I'm getting a little bit to Garry's biography—people who lived intellectually provincial lives and discovered an intellectual vocation at church or synagogue. Basically, the only intellectual they knew was the guy who gave those sermons every week, who were kind of like public intellectuals. And I think I identified with that, coming from my reform, Jewish, suburban, philistine background, but he did that and I hadn't thought to interview him. I wasn't living in Chicago then, I was in New York. It hadn't really occurred to me, and it just didn't seem particularly central.

But by the time I got to my next book, *Nixonland*, I was living in Chicago and I was aware that this guy lived in Evanston and he was either retiring or about to retire from Northwestern. I had to meet him, I had to talk to him and that was a fascinatingly frustrating process because I wanted to talk to him about all these absolutely magnificent, monumental pieces of journalism he

wrote that completely stand the test of time and are absolutely indispensable sources for what I try to get into my history, which is basically how a time feels like—not only the politics, but the culture and the society and the economics. He wrote an amazing article about the time Billy Graham and Richard Nixon did a rally together at the University of Tennessee stadium. He wrote about getting arrested with a bunch of writers in 1972 at an anti-war protest. He wrote about how everyone was taking notes in prison for their little essays, and he said, “Scribble, scribble what a crew!”

I wanted to talk to him about his amazing book-length magazine article about preparations for riots in the late sixties. And what I discovered when we sat down in a cafe in Evanston was, first of all, it was hard to keep the conversation going because so many people wanted to go up to them and say, “hi,” readers of his. He was approachable and accessible and beloved. But also that he didn’t want to look backwards. He did not have anything particular to say that wasn’t already in the articles, because he was working on something else. He was writing his books about the Catholic church or the guns in America. He wasn’t someone who had this kind of catalog of reflections about stuff he’d done in the past, which is reflected in his unbelievable range of writing, which keeps on changing and growing, even now in his eighties.

**Eyal Press:** I’m assuming those pieces on Nixon you’re referring to the ones he wrote, I believe in *Esquire*, that appear as chapters in his great book, *Nixon Agonistes*.

**Rick Perlstein:** That right, which is probably my least favorite of the books. There’s some amazing important chapters in there, but the thesis is one of the few things he wrote that doesn’t hold up, which is that Nixon represents this antediluvian ideology of libertarian economics.

**Eyal Press:** The self-made man.

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah. Libertarian economics, which a) he presumed to be completely passé and b) probably not that huge part of what Nixon was about, certainly compared to other people.

**Eyal Press:** Interesting. So, it wasn’t *Nixon Agonistes*, because I recently, in preparation for talking to you, went and reread a couple of those chapters and also the introduction to his book.

**Rick Perlstein:** There’s a really good kind of dispatch on the ground in New Hampshire, which is a role model for how to do an election dispatch. And there’s a great chapter about this anticommunist priest who was very influential and a great chapter on the Checkers speech, which does what he does so well, which is actually do research on what actually happened and cut through the clutter of clichéd memory. But, that book was not an influence on me. Sorry to lead you down the wrong path there.

**Eyal Press:** First of all, I enjoyed the reading I did, and, actually, I thought of that because at one point, early on, he depicts Nixon as a striver who bitterly resented folks like the Kennedys, who were kind of born into their success, which makes me think of your—

**Rick Perlstein:** But that’s not where I got that idea.

**Eyal Press:** It's not where you got that idea? So where did you get that idea? Tell us about Nixon, the Orthogonian, and where you got that idea.

**Rick Perlstein:** I think I got that idea from Fawn Brody's psychobiography of Nixon, which was a book that she died before it was completed. It was kind of assembled after her death. I got that from someone who wrote a book, I don't remember his name, called *The Running of Richard Nixon*. I got that from interviews that were done of Richard Nixon by one of the people who helped him with his memoir. That's the funny thing. I basically got it from the books that happened to be in the library when I was looking that day.

**Eyal Press:** And can you unpack the idea a little bit?

**Rick Perlstein:** Sure. There's a very robust tradition in Republican and right-wing electioneering—that you can even see in Edmund Burke now that I have the fullness of the picture—in which people who are outsiders to the elite seeking entry into the elite, ground their politics in resentment for the elite.

When Richard Nixon goes before the public in 1969 and says, “There's this great silent majority of Americans were being condescended to by the liberal left-wing loud mouths who hung up all the oxygen with their woke protests, well we're just the kind of ordinary hard-working strivers who work hard and play by the rules, as Bill Clinton put it. Richard Nixon was one of the authors of this in modern American politics and it comes from his own experience as the brightest kid in the class, coming from this poor striving family. He got a scholarship to Harvard, but his family couldn't afford to send him there, so we went to the hometown school, but he was a commuter, he couldn't afford to live in the dorms. And because he was this dorky guy, he was the only kid in his grade school class who wore a tie and he complained that the other kids smelled bad. He couldn't get into the school's one fraternity, which was called the Franklins, and they were kind of like the big men on campus. They were like, in *Animal House*, the preppy fraternity, and so he started his own fraternity of the strivers, and the political insight at the heart of this is that, in a democracy you need the most people. There are a lot more people who resent the elite than are in the elite.

When you look at every kind of station across his rise to the top of American politics, it's marked by one of these rhetorical movements in which he draws this distinction. The most distinguished example is the Checkers speech where he was really the first person to convincingly make the argument that the Democratic party is the party of elite professionals—aristocrats, basically. Like the Kennedys. So he starts his own fraternity called the Orthogonians, which means upright, square, basically. And the Orthogonians are the people he talks about in the Checkers speech. He says he and his wife drive a five-year old Oldsmobile, and she has a respectable Republican cloth coat, which is in distinction to this scandal in the Truman administration where one of Truman's chief of staff supposedly got a vicuna fur coat as a bribe.

He's basically saying, “the Democrats, run by this egghead candidate Adelaide Stevenson, are snobs and Republicans are the party of the working class.” And this is the schtick that Sarah Palin plays. Trump does it, although he has a hard time saying that he's not a part of the elite because it makes him mad. He's like, “I'm smarter than those guys,” but that is all born from

Nixon. And it even goes back to Edmund Burke, who was this Irish guy who was knocking to get into the Episcopalian Anglican elite. But even though I didn't get the idea from Garry Wills, he's a bit of an Orthogonian himself, coming from this small Michigan town. I'm a bit of an Orthogonian myself. I like to say we're all Franklins, we're all Orthogonians. They're very plastic categories. We all have moments in which we can lord it over others and we all have moments in which we feel lorded over by others.

**Eyal Press:** It did strike me that Wills is from the Midwest, as you say.

**Rick Perlstein:** But he does eventually find his way to Northwestern and Chicago and I don't think that's incidental. He is and I am reporting from the middle of the country, which I think has an effect on how you see the world.

**Eyal Press:** No question as someone who grew up in Buffalo, I can certainly identify with that. Wills is someone who starts out as conservative, but by the end of the sixties or early seventies, he's on Nixon's enemies list and going to anti-war protests. But he is someone who writes about conservative figures like Nixon and Reagan in a way that is obviously critical—he doesn't share their worldview—but he does take their ideas and their principles seriously. I wonder if that is part of what you try to emulate and why you admire his work?

**Rick Perlstein:** Well, he takes everybody's ideas and principles seriously. He takes every intellectual inquiry he embarks upon to the radix, to the root, whether it's why the Catholic Church has priests, but shouldn't have priests; how America doesn't really have a constitution because the president has plenipotentiary power to end life on Earth with a nuclear bomb without any constitutional review.

When he writes about people, he often is more serious about their ideas than they are themselves. One of the things I was really intrigued about in his profiles of politicians was if they say that they're influenced by a writer, he'll ask them about the writer and will know 10 times more about him. He absolutely eviscerates Daniel Patrick Moynihan in that manner, but he also does an interview with Jerry Brown, in which he completely catches him tongue-tied. So when I did interview him, he really didn't have much recollection or interest in talking about the stuff he'd written in the sixties. Another thing I asked him about was—he can be so savage in criticizing the pretensions of politicians—I asked him if he feared that that kind of writing in the seventies (and not only his, but others—I would think of Mike Royko too) helped contribute to the anti-government sentiment that helped Reagan along the way. And he didn't really get it. He didn't really wrap his mind around the question because to him—what does Marx say? “Ruthless criticism of everything existing?” It's just like his natural *métier*.

**Eyal Press:** Well, that certainly comes across in his essays in the *New York Review of Books*. I wanted to ask you, I don't know if Wills has ever reviewed you, but if he hasn't, would you want to be reviewed by him given what he's done to—I'm thinking of his review of Seymour Hersh's book on Kennedy, where he ends by saying “Hersh wrote this book to destroy Kennedy's reputation and what he's done instead is destroyed his own.”

**Rick Perlstein:** Well, see, and that's what I love. There's no deference. To me, I cherish the idea

of the Republic of Letters, that once the words are on the page, it doesn't matter whether you know the person or don't know the person. Your first, last, and only obligation is to the reader and to the truth as you see it, without fear or favor.

And so, yes, I would be honored to be eviscerated by Garry Wills because I know it would be rooted in this depth of erudition and a critical mind that's without parallel and without agenda. He models the identity of a critical intellectual; he doesn't care who likes him. And of course the most famous example of this, which I don't know if—we've probably all run this kind of scenario in our head, I'm going to admit it—it's when he shows up at the White House. Do you know this story?

**Eyal Press:** I do, but tell it. It's a great story.

**Rick Perlstein:** Wills is one of the group of historians who are summoned by Barack Obama to say, "What wisdom do you have me from the treasure chest of history about how I can be an awesome president? And Garry Wills shows up and he says, "Get the hell out of Afghanistan cause it's going to be another Vietnam." And then the second meeting comes and he's not invited, which says something about both Barack Obama and Garry Wills. And, of course, he was vindicated in the fullness of time, but it took a long time. It took a long time.

**Eyal Press:** And I believe I've read him or heard him say about that meeting that the other historians in the room were extremely sycophantic. He did not neglect to point that out.

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah. And if you want to know what my fantasy in life is, it's to tell off a president, to tell the truth to a president.

**Eyal Press:** Including a potentially friendly one, in the case of Obama. I suspect Wills voted for Obama and did not hold back.

**Rick Perlstein:** All the more so. Well, I mean, obviously criticism is a form of love, because it's a form of respect. It means, I think you want to hear me, so I want to be heard.

**Eyal Press:** You left graduate school and you dabbled in journalism, but then you go back to history, and you're a historian without formal academic training. And that happens to also be true of Garry Wills. He does not have a PhD in history. He has a PhD, I believe in Classics or in Latin or something. But, in any case, is part of appeal, or maybe the draw, the confidence to write big books of history on these really wide canvases without formal academic training?

**Rick Perlstein:** I really respect his confidence. I don't know how much the connection is to what I try to do, but I think I kind of owe this maybe to the world of University of Chicago, which is another part of my formation that basically any idea, no matter how widely accepted or popular, can be just utter bullshit.

In a book like *Reagan's America*, which is really—my stuff on Reagan is really just a footnote to what he did in that book. To see him say, "Well, Reagan says this about this college strike that he participated in in the late twenties and early thirties. Here's what I learned actually looking at the

newspaper accounts. It couldn't possibly have happened on this day. This couldn't have possibly happened. He made this up. No one remembers this." And then, he says, "Well, look at all the accounts of all the people he saved from drowning in the newspaper. I think he wrote those himself."

And just being like, yes, of course this makes absolute sense. This guy's president—you would think that people would think to fact-check the guy. But people just don't do that and I don't think that dishonors PhD-trained historians. It has a lot more to do with the world of journalism and pundits and popular history, I think. But the idea that nothing is sacred is really, really important. And the fact that he's willing to do this to the Catholic church. I mean, he literally has a book called *Why Priests?* in which he says, "They get the Bible all wrong and if they took it seriously, there wouldn't be any priests." I mean, that's how radical he can be. It's like "Oh, it turns out that the president is not the head of the military, the phrase Commander-in-Chief, that just means basically he broke ties when commanders in the field couldn't figure out who's authority trumped." He's just willing to just go there: to just dig deeper and deeper and deeper.

**Eyal Press:** One of the things, when I think about Wills, he's unsparing; his book on Kennedy is—despite what he said about Hersh's book on Kennedy—his book on Kennedy is devastating. But I want to read you a sentence that is actually in *Nixon Agonistes* that I wanted to get your reaction to. He writes at the very end of the preface and he's sort of cueing the reader. He says, "I was never a Nixon hater. I felt too sorry for the man."

**Rick Perlstein:** Right, right. I think I honored that spirit in that I have a lot of readers who were like, "I hated Nixon, but now I kind of feel pity for the guy."

**Eyal Press:** I was wondering if that echoes for you or if your pity is considerably less?

**Rick Perlstein:** No, I pity him too.

**Eyal Press:** You do?

**Rick Perlstein:** I think that Henry Kissinger who has his own issues, he said, "What this man could have become, if someone would have just loved him," which is just a certain kind of pity you have for the guy. He had all this brilliance and actually a lot of humane intent. John Aloysius Farrell, who had a very good biography of Nixon goes more than I do into the idea that his good angels and his bad devil were at war with himself. But I see that. I try not to keep score when it comes to politicians—"This guy's a bad guy. This guy's a good guy"—that's a distraction from the work. And, of course, my subject is not the politicians, it's the public. Why were these guys embraced? Which is a little different from how Garry does things.

**Eyal Press:** I wonder though, if for you, having read your books over time, it's become harder to... So, in your first book on the Goldwater movement, you're dealing with a conservative movement that doesn't have power, right? It's in fact, it's written out of history. They're the losers.

**Rick Perlstein:** There's a lot more affection for them in that first book.

**Eyal Press:** That's what I'm wondering about. And then by your later books, they actually have power now and their agenda is the national agenda, and how I wonder how that has been for you as a struggle to maintain a certain tone.

**Rick Perlstein:** Well, maybe I just got more accurate with the passage of time, and more research and more reflection.

**Eyal Press:** Well do you look back at *Before the Storm* and think, "I was too nice to these guys?"

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah, definitely. I can give you a specific example and I've been thinking a lot about this as I contemplate my next project. I interviewed a lot of these guys, the early 1960s young "Americans for Freedom" types. I sat down with a bunch of them for an interview at the Capitol Hill Club, which is a Republican social club. And they were telling me these war stories. And, one thing that was very exciting to me was—remember, this is the nineties and you and I, and every other liberal is trying to make sense of how we can turn the Democratic party into a vehicle for liberalism, for progress, and not this moderate, milquetoast, split-the-difference triangulation machine that Bill Clinton had turned it into. That's what they had done with the Eisenhower-era Republican party. I kind of saw them as role models, for one thing. And I definitely saw them as scrappy underdogs, which is how they represented themselves, and I also kind of bought the idea, which I think has been pretty roundly debunked by historians and the fullness of time, that they had purged the dangerous elements from their movement and turned it into a movement that, as William F. Buckley put it, a politician could subscribe to without fear of embarrassment. One of the stories they told me about and that I researched on its own, was when a bunch of these guys went to a 1961 conference of an organization called the National Student Association, which is basically an umbrella organization for student councils. Now, the irony of this, as you probably know, is it turned out to be a CIA front, but leave that to the side.

**Eyal Press:** Minor detail.

**Rick Perlstein:** They saw that, as they always do, as this liberal hegemonic machine for the deep state and the regime. And so they had it in mind to basically take it over. And they told me this whole story about how they used all sorts of means of subterfuge to win all the resolution votes, to make them more robustly anti-communist, and they did so by blending into the crowd by wearing suspenders and using walkie-talkies. And at the time, you can look at it in *Before the Storm*, I write about it as this cool, political hi-jinks and then, by the time I'm writing *Nixonland*, I'm like, "Oh, wow, this is exactly the kind of thing by exactly the kind of people that people went to jail for during Watergate." I thought about Richard Nixon saying, if you wanted a job that was sensitive or possibly legal to do, you hire a healthy right-wing exuberant. The fact that Jeb Magruder and G Gordon Liddy were basically from this group of people. And you realize that these healthy, exuberant, hi-jinks are actually, in a lot of ways, the seeds of January 6th.

**Eyal Press:** Has that made writing about the right less fun for you?

**Rick Perlstein:** To me, the pleasure in doing this work, whether it's journalism or history, is the pleasure of achieving some kind of rich understanding, and communicating that understanding,

and also coming from a place of moral grounding and the power that can come from making something as accurate as can make it, but also having a moral valence to what you are reporting. I mean, whether you're writing journalism or doing history, you're reporting; you're trying to come up with a convincing account of what happens. And I don't think that that's a morally neutral act because, I think the values of liberalism and the left are true and good for the world and the values of conservatism and the right, especially as they've evolved in the American context, are bad for the world, and that doesn't mean pulling punches when I write about liberals and the left, cause I do a of that, including to my allies like Garry Wills, and it doesn't mean not finding a saving grace in a lot of what conservatives do and believe.

**Eyal Press:** And Wills himself is a very moral writer.

**Rick Perlstein:** He's a moral writer. I write, first of all, and I think he does too, in my identity as a citizen. He also writes as a Christian; I'm not a Christian. I don't believe this dude walked on water. Garry may well, but I do respect the radical truths of Christianity and a lot of what Garry Wills is doing in all this writing on christianity—which I enjoy a great deal. I did an interview with him at a bookstore in Chicago about his book, *Why Priests?*—is that he's willing to delve down to the radical roots of Christianity. I wouldn't be so interested in the project of American citizenship and studying American history, if I didn't find something potentially redemptive in it. No one alive has probably written more devastatingly about the corruptions of the institutions of Christianity than Garry Wills, but that doesn't seem to have shaken his faith. I mean, literal faith.

**Eyal Press:** Rick, before we started recording, you said something about influences. This is the theme of the podcast. We've talked about one influence on you but do you have something else you'd like to share about just influences in general and how you view them?

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah, I'm not a huge influence guy. I think I've mostly carved my own path with such a broad swath of influences that it's kind of hard to point to it. People say they're influenced by a musician or an artist or a book or writer—it's often coincident with them having run across that person at the right time. It doesn't mean that they're the closest to their paradigm. It just happens to be that everyone loves the albums that they listened to when they were 15. If I say, I was really influenced by this one book, it doesn't necessarily mean it's a good book. I can point at some really goofy ones that got me thinking in the way I'm thinking. So, I'm really grateful for the opportunity to raise up Garry Wills and think about my own work in the context of his, but it took me a little bit convincing from you, I think, to get me to do this.

**Eyal Press:** Well, I'm very glad you did. Rick, thank you so much for joining us and for your time, and for this conversation.

**Rick Perlstein:** Thank you so much. It's so great to be in touch.

**Eyal Press:** Primary Sources is a co-production of *Public Books* and Type Media Center. *Public Books* is an online magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship. You can learn more at [www.publicbooks.org](http://www.publicbooks.org). Type Media Center is a non profit home for independent journalists. It is committed to building a more equitable future for journalism in the public interest. Learn more about its flagship programs at [www.typemediacenter.org](http://www.typemediacenter.org).

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