

#103 Reagan, Public Education, and the Rise of the New Right

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And we have been spending a lot of time together.

Schneider I don't know what button I pushed on my phone today. And it called up like, here are the things you usually do with your phone Jack, and the options were the New York Times crossword puzzle, email Jennifer and there was like one other let's see, Oh, Gmail and Twitter and outlook. It was like work. You know, like hoping for a non-work-related email crossword and Jennifer that's my life right now.

Berkshire Now that doesn't sound so bad. Well, the reason we've been spending so much... I'm just going to erase that. The reason we've been spending so much time together is that we have been promoting our brand new book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*. And we've been, you know, talking to people about it and also doing these very cool virtual book clubs. And that's where a group of people in a city or a state get together, they read the book and then we stop by and chat with them. And it's been absolutely great, but it does mean that Jack and I spent an enormous amount of time looking at each other on Zoom or Google Meet.

Schneider I actually, I just hide your camera these days, Jennifer, sorry.

Berkshire Well, when we're not doing book groups for a *Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, I really think that my life has become a book club of one. That's all

Schneider Only, only when the books you suggest are over a thousand pages long Jennifer, that's your Moby Dick book club?

Berkshire Well, that's pretty much, you know... I'm reading all the time now and I'm either trying to convince Jack that we should do an episode about a book, I'm tweeting enthusiastically about a book. And so when the time arrives that I actually get to talk about it, I'm really excited.

Schneider I don't, I am so happy that you're excited, Jennifer, I'm here for you as well as always these days.

Berkshire Well, our episode today stars a writer that I am so thrilled to have on. I have been a huge fan of his for years. His name is Rick Perlstein and he is the author of a whole series of, of really monumental books. And I don't say this lightly, the one we're going to be talking about is *Reaganland* about America's turn to the right during the Reagan years. But before that there was *Nixonland*. He wrote a great book about Goldwater and Reagan wraps up his series. So I don't know what Rick's going to be doing next, but he really, I feel like he has chronicled the mid century in the U S in a way that has really helped me understand where we are today.

Schneider Yeah, his book about Barry Goldwater was just an important resource for me as I was for our book project. Just learning more about Goldwater and the movement that arose around him. And the, the continuation there from Goldwater to Reagan is a really natural one. Once you understand, not only Reagan's infatuation with Goldwater's ideas but you know, also the, the sort of the failure of Goldwater's bid for president and the way that it led to a long-term movement to build organizations and institutions and power and Reagan really represented the kind of coming out party for those efforts.

Berkshire Well, Reaganland comes in at just over 1100 pages, Jack, which means that we have a lot to discuss.

Schneider We do. And I will let you lead the way Jennifer,

Berkshire If you're a regular listener then you know that I am not only a voracious reader, but that I often get very excited about a book that seemingly has little to do with education. Invite author of said book onto the show to discuss a topic they don't know much about. Well, with Rick Perlstein something very different happened. In preparation for our interview, he looked at his latest book, Reaganland, with fresh eyes and saw something he'd never noticed before. Reagan was obsessed with public education and he wasn't alone.

Perlstein But it's not just this book. I mean, Ronald Reagan really starts his political career in California as a Crusader against what's going on at the University of California, Berkeley. And it's very much, even though we're not talking about K-12 education, the idea that this public institution was not serving the public, but was serving this kind of group of, out of touch elites was absolutely central to his attack on Berkeley as a place that was cobbling student protestors. And one of the very first things he did as governor was punished the university of California system by instituting tuition for the first time, that was a very much an undergirding, his entire ideology. You know, he, he used to say that if obviously you don't have the best people working in the public sector, because if they were the best people, they would be hired away by the private sector for more money. You know, as if, you know, kind of market values are the only values, right? And of course public education is our biggest, most important, most profound institution that runs according to values other than, you know, the profit motive and supply and demand. So of course, Ronald Reagan is gonna, you know, take aim at that.

Berkshire And once Reagan was out of the California governor's office and cultivating the national audience that would power him into the White House, tirades against public schools were central to his message.

Perlstein After he's governor, you know, he makes a living, giving these daily radio addresses, right? And education was one of his biggest topics. I mean, one of the things that stopped me cold was when he criticized the National Education Association, the teacher's union of course, for proposing a national curriculum standards. And he said that they're following a playbook, laid

down by Adolph Hitler, right? So some of his strangest, most impassioned extremist rhetoric involved education.

Berkshire The subtitle of Perlstein's new book is America's Right Turn - 1976-1980. And to understand why public education ends up being such a key part of this story we need some context about what else was going on. I asked Perlstein to distill the history to which he's devoted 1000's of pages to, say, a minute plus.

Perlstein By the middle of the 1970s, that national greatness, that moral grand jury, that success in just about every field of endeavor suddenly feels to be kind of draining away. And the signposts for that are, you know, America losing its first war in Vietnam and not only losing the war, but losing its moral authority to basically make the argument that America has the world's best interest at heart, because obviously it's a very cruel imperialist kind of war. And then those Watergate, right, Americans can't anymore trust their presidents. Richard Nixon is kind of revealing himself as no better than a mafia don. And then there's, you know, the economic part of it. In 1972, 73 is when wages for working class people start to stagnate. In 1973, 74 is the first oil crisis. And the first trade deficit America ever has since the 1870s or eighties, I think comes in 1971. The idea that America is the most prosperous country in which the prosperity is widely shared is draining away. So that's the context for all sorts of discontents on the ground, all over the place that really get weaponized.

Berkshire What's key for the purposes of this podcast is that the grassroots populist anger that was breaking out all over the country, well, a lot of it was focused on education. Perlstein chronicles a rising rage over things like court-ordered busing in the north. As he argues, the issues were often highly localized. But a rising generation of conservative activists on what he calls the new right, was quickly figuring out how to turn local anger into a national political force.

Perlstein These guys, these new right guys in the seventies, they look for the kind of grassroots populist anger breaking out all over the country on all sorts of different issues. One of the examples is, you know, parents who are frustrated that federal judges are ordering the integration of schools in the North. Another one that's happening at the exact same time is the Kanawha County West Virginia textbook wars. The public schools, the school board, are basically people from who are kind of cosmopolitan liberals who live in Charleston, the city in West Virginia. And they adapt a suite of textbooks that, you know, basically asks kids to think critically about society, you know, that include passages from African-American writers like James Baldwin, that asks them to compare the myths in the Bible to Greek myth, thus suggesting that the Bible is not divinely inspired, but just one more belief system. And they're so enraged by this, that they protest. They started a grassroots protest movement, as passionate as the one in South Boston that ends up with the school board being dynamited.

Berkshire If you've never had the pleasure of reading one of Perlstein's histories, you're missing out. He brings the day-by-day rhythm of the 70's to life - and what quickly becomes apparent is that these battles over schools and what they taught and who got to decide were breaking out everywhere. Perlstein says that's because they were about something bigger.

Perlstein And the reason the schools are such a powerful vessel for this new right crusade is that the schools seem to be a challenge to the family, to the patriarchal family, to the nuclear family and the church as institutions, inculcating children in a set of values in a morality. And after the 1960s, when so many revolutions occur in the very organization of society and the 1970s, those revolutions began working their way into the mainstream of society in the educational university colleges in curricula and schools are the bloody crossroads in the 1970s, cultural war.

Berkshire Or take the explosive issue of government regulation of private schools. In Concord, NH there was yet another flare up when city officials said that a building being used by a fundamentalist Baptist preacher for a school wasn't up to code.

Perlstein And the preacher says, this is my church. You have no right to regulate my church. The first amendment says no interference of the state and church. So he begins a public protest that gets preachers from all over the country, rallying and town square, and Concord, and threatening to come back in the thousands and willing to go to jail and even die, you know, to keep Caesar from regulating their schools. And you see more and more of these people against the state creating textbooks, standards, people protesting, compulsory attendance, people protesting that teachers need to be accredited, right? So they're kind of creating this parallel non civic kind of education system.

Berkshire But it was when the IRS rolled out stricter regulations for private schools started by churches that things really boiled over. It was the culmination of a years long battle by the government to reign in the segregation academies that sprang up all across the south in the wake of Brown v Board. But the IRS rules also took aim at church schools which had exploded in number since 1962, when the Supreme Court outlawed prayer in schools.

Perlstein The rubber hits the road when the commissioner of the IRS under Jimmy Carter says, look, a lot of these schools are not following Brown vs Board of education. They're segregated. They've, they've been basically working on this to try and enforce Supreme Court decisions that have been coming down since the early 1970s. The IRS comes up with progressively more stringent and specific regulations about how schools can certify that they're not segregating. Ultimately in 1978, the rules that are handed down are sufficiently stringent that a lot of schools don't think that they can follow them, even if they have no intent of being segregated. And it becomes a national sensation. One of the most dramatic scenes in my book is there, the IRS holds hearings on these, these new rules and Christians come from all over the country as far away, literally as from Alaska. And one by one, they line up at this microphone and say that they're willing to go to jail or die in order to keep the government out of their schools.

Berkshire So Jack - this battle over federal tax exemptions for private schools was such a big deal. But I'd barely heard of it, and even as I was reading Rick's book I had to keep going back to try to understand, you know, 'what was it they were fighting about?' So I think we're going

need a little assistance from you to help us understand not just why this was important but why this issue is still relevant today.

Schneider Yeah, I think what's important to know here, Jennifer, is that this was a really big deal in the late 1970s and early 1980s and most people today don't really remember it. In fact, the question of tax exempt status is not really on anyone's radar and it absolutely should be because if private schools weren't tax exempt, then you know, that's, that's 20 to 30% of their revenue just gone instantly. And in fact, it could be a lot more if we think about, you know, the valuations of the land that they sit on, for instance, or their buildings if they had to pay taxes, annual taxes on those it could just be prohibitively expensive to a private school. And back in the 1970s, it was actually a legal strategy by black families and black advocacy organizations to attack the tax exempt status of discriminatory private schools, right?

These segregation academies that had been set up across the South in response to Brown and the second Brown ruling in 1955. So there was a court case in 1970 where black families won an injunction in Mississippi and throughout the seventies, there was an effort to really expand on this and to take away the tax exempt status of these schools. And eventually the IRS in the Carter administration moved to create tougher rules. You know, you, you couldn't just sign a document and say, no, no, no, we don't discriminate against anybody. And by the way, there were schools that refused to sign that document. So instead they were saying, we're, we're actually going to enforce the law here. And Reagan came out and, you know, in a very Reagan way, just framed this as bureaucrats run a muck. And eventually what we see is that you know, we here we are 40 years later and this question still lives with us, right?

Which schools can be tax exempt? Remember that tax exempt status is akin to being a public charity, right. Is it a public good to have some schools that are pursuing not only, you know, potentially discriminative admissions policies but discriminative teaching right. Teaching particular kinds of curricula that you know, either erase particular populations or frame them as wicked and evil as we've talked about with regard to LGBT people in some curricula in previous episodes. So I think the unresolved nature of this question is, is really important. And it's one that I think we should all be paying attention to.

Berkshire Back to Rick Perlstein. Part of what makes Reaganland such compelling reading is that you see so many of the forces that still shape our politics today starting to emerge. For example, that resentment among religious groups over what they saw as an out of control culture, well it powered all of those school protests AND gave rise to a major political movement.

Perlstein This finds its institutional expression by 1979, when Jerry Falwell the very popular televangelist who that same year delivers a sermon saying he would love to see the day when, when there are no public schools, that the schools can be returned back to Christianity. He starts the Moral Majority and the Moral Majority is a political lobby. It turns churches into precinct organizations. It's like kind of the equivalent on the right of unions on the left. And again, the galvanizing institution for all this stuff is the school. And the school has such profound emotional power because that's where the child leaves the home.

Berkshire This is also the moment when a kind of free-market fundamentalism begins to take hold. It's chief spokesman was a libertarian economist named Milton Friedman. As Perlstein points out, Friedman had been making his market pitch for decades and was pretty much dismissed as a kook. But things were changing.

Perlstein You know, the reason his ideas suddenly seem more respectable is that the Keynesian way of explaining economics just doesn't seem to work anymore. You know, we now know that there was this, this was kind of like a temporary blip and things kind of returned to the status quo ante after these kinks work their way out of the system. But, you know, not before a lot of economic pain was caused by, you know, Milton Friedman's style economic policies, but he was, you know, basically had this evangelical faith in the free markets, magical power to solve all sorts of problems when it came to coordinating every kind of institution. And at the center of his thinking was also education. He was the guy, as you write in your book, you know, they came up with the idea of, you know, educational vouchers that the government should just hand people money and they can pay for tuition. And then the schools that are basketball, out-compete the schools that aren't the best and will reach this equilibrium in which we have the best possible education system.

Berkshire One of the many things I learned reading Reaganland is that free-market fundamentalism espoused by Milton Friedman and others overlapped in all sort of weird ways with the demands of the emerging moral majority.

Perlstein The Christian right part, actually, is kind of related to this because a lot of these preachers were also libertarian. Jerry Falwell talked about Milton Friedman in his 1980 book, Listen America!. There was one of the most extreme field theologians of the Christian right was this guy named Dr. RJ Rushdoony. He was a Christian reconstructionist. And what that meant was he believed that America's civil law should be guided by old Testament, biblical law, which includes things like stoning for homosexuals. And he, but he was very influential because he considered schools to be sort of these sort of churches of the secular state, right? He said that he, he, he wrote a book called the Messianic Character of Public Education. And his son-in-law Gary North, who was basically the keeper of his flame, was a libertarian economist who, who worship Friedrich Hayek, and probably thought that Milton Friedman was a little too left wing for his tastes. So these are not mutually exclusive categories.

Berkshire So Jack, when Rick describes Milton Friedman as a kind of star of the 70's he's not exaggerating. One of the weirdest cultural events of this time period was Milton Friedman's TV show that aired on PBS. And you were kind enough to pick out an excerpt for us to listen to.

Berkshire That sound you heard, by the way, was Milton Friedman walking off through the New Hampshire snow, away from a little red schoolhouse. Jack - you watched a bunch of these. So thank you for that. What did the experience teach you?

Berkshire Back in Reaganland, another development is underway which will feel very familiar to you. This is also the moment when business leaders whom Perlstein refers to as boardroom Jacobins begin their crusade against unions and government regulation. And they also decide that the youth need to be reeducated.

Berkshire That was Rick Pearlstein, author of Reaganland: America's Right Turn, 1976-1980. He's also the author of Nixonland and the Invisible Bridge - all indispensable reading if you want to understand how conservatism took over American politics. And Jack and I will be right back to discuss the long reach of Milton Friedman and to reveal the subject of this episode's In the Weed's segment for our Patreon subscribers. Here's a hint: Jack is proposing a 'do over' for schools and students when this pandemic finally ends.

Berkshire So Jack, one of the challenges of immersing oneself in a book like Reagan land, which, you know, tops out at a thousand plus pages, is that there are, I am now so full of facts and tidbits and Wikipedia. I really am. And I don't have an outlet except for one.

Schneider Yeah. Right. It was going to say, you do have an outlet right here. You're texting me as you accumulate it. So, so now I also possess the trivia.

Berkshire Okay. So here goes. So when, when Milton Friedman won the Nobel prize in economics in 1976, he was not at home in Chicago. He was off somewhere doing very important work. Do you know what he was doing?

Schneider I think I do, but can I just offer an annoying corrective that there isn't, there isn't really a Nobel prize in economics that it's, it's a prize in memory of Alfred Nobel that is actually named after the central bank of Sweden. So let's, let's, let's not give him a Nobel prize. Let's give him the Bank of Sweden prize instead. I don't know the answer, but I have a guess. And I'm guessing it's Chile.

Berkshire Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my life. No, you didn't get it.

Schneider I wasn't even close?

Berkshire He was in Michigan going door to door campaigning in favor of an incredibly strict cap on property taxes, right. To basically like me cap the state's ability to provide public services. And this was that he was doing the Lord's work.

Schneider I was confusing Chile with "chilly." And that's, again, going door to door in Michigan is, is a brisk enterprise. As well as a California native, I can tell you that, you know, we have our own knee capping limit on property tax increases and that long term, California residents will tell you that once upon a time we had all the money we needed to fund public education in the state. And now suddenly we do not because of these kinds of efforts. So yeah, I mean the, the legacy of Milton Friedman lives on, in so many ways. And you know, the fact that we are still

talking about him today is, you know, a sign that, you know, when, when the great economists of the 20th century are forgotten, we will still be unmaking the mess that Milton Friedman made.

Berkshire Well, Jack, obviously you were very wrong when you answered Chile instead of Michigan, but yet you weren't, you weren't completely off the mark or off the map. So I want you there, this is really relevant up to the present day. So I want you to just tell us what you were thinking about.

Schneider Yeah, right. So I had the year wrong. So while you were making fun of me, I just let my fingers do the walking on the internet. It was 1981. That Chile based on Milton Friedman's ideas introduced a universal school voucher which, you know, transformed the nature of education and educational opportunity in that country. You know, the percentage of students who were enrolled in Chilean public schools declined from something like 80% to 50%, just a massive outflow of students. And this was part of a broader effort by Chicago trained economists or university of Chicago trained economists to remake Chile to remake its economy, but really its social fabric. And that you know, in the same way that we are trying to unmake Milton Friedman's mess in the United States 50, 40 years later Chile is doing the same.

And actually you know, for the past year, students who have been leading the effort but it's been, you know, hundreds of thousands of Chileans in the streets protesting what they see as you know, in the words of Bernie Sanders, a rigged system, a rigged economy a broken system that is tilted towards the most advantaged. And you know, in some ways I see this as a kind of harbinger for you know, the same sorts of things here in the U S right, that we're kind of at an inflection point right now where either we support public education, we double down on the public nature of public education, or you know, we continue on the route that we're presently on which, you know, continues to accelerate towards the unmaking of that system. And we end up with people in the streets and, and maybe, and maybe that's the best possible outcome. But it certainly isn't one that instills a lot of good cheer at this time of year.

Berkshire Well, as part of my perpetual reading group of one, I've been reading this fascinating paper by Nancy MacLean, she's the author of democracy and chains. And we had her on the pod several years ago and she was recounting another paper written by an economist, Tyler Cowen, who's at George Mason. And he's kind of a leading voice of the libertarian cause. And he was basically acknowledging that, you know, their big challenge is that because their ideas are so unpopular, they can't really, it's really hard to get people to go along with them. Right. And so the, the countries that they define is free, meaning free in terms of, you know, property and, and tilted in favor of what they would call Liberty also tend to be the most authoritarian. And I thought, what a, what a fascinating admission, because you really see that with, with education, that, that when it comes to asking people to give up public education, it's not a popular cause.

Schneider Yeah. And, you know, as you always point out Jennifer it's not a popular cause with people on the left or people on the right, right. If we're talking about ordinary people and that's something important to keep in mind here.

Berkshire Well, Jack, I really appreciate all of your assistance with this episode, especially your hard work in the AV department.

Schneider I'm just going to pretend that I didn't hear that tone, Jennifer. That's fine.

Berkshire And I understand that you have an important announcement for us.

Schneider Sure. I'll do it. Okay. It actually is really exciting. This is year three of our graduate student research contest. And if people are unfamiliar with it, they should go back into the archive. The specific episodes that they could listen to with previous winners and runners up are episode 69 episode 75 episode 95 and episode 96. So w you know, we have had, now I think five winners and runners up because we had co runners up last year. And those have been some of my favorite episodes. So if you are a graduate student and your work involves education, then we want to know what you're up to. And if you think that you have the stuff for an episode of, have you heard, then we want you to apply to our graduate student research contest. It's a really easy application. All you need to do is send just a brief, like 200, 300 word description of your research, and just in like two sentences, make the case for why you think it belongs in the podcast. You know, we want to know some other stuff too, like, you know, what your program is and where you're in school, but that's just largely for our own interests. And the deadline for applications is January 31st of 2021. And the winner will appear on a spring 20, 21 episode.

Berkshire And all the information you need is at Haveyouheardblog.com. It's right up on the front page, and we will be tweeting wildly about it as always, but you should really apply. Those really have turned out to be such cool episodes. And what amazes me is how much I learn working on them. It's just, it's..they're really exciting. So, so please consider applying.

And of course, it's my job to try to lure people to the paywall as I always do. And we rely on our listeners to support us. We don't accept any kind of paid advertising. Instead, we rely on Patreon and many of our listeners now chip in a couple of dollars a month to help keep the show going and pay our outstanding producer. And we've actually got a special offer, limited time offer that if you go to patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast and join at the \$10 a month rate, you'll get a free copy of our hot off the presses, new book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, what an amazing offer.

Schneider Well, you know, it's not really free, right? Because here you're paying in a different way, but but those of you who want to support the show without opening your wallets, purses, and pocketbooks there are lots of ways to do so as regular listeners know my preferred is if you tell people about the show, I just believe without evidence that if you tell your friends, colleagues, and family members, that you're listening to this great podcast about education that they'll start listening to and our little movement will grow. But of course there are other things you can do. You can go on wherever you get your podcasts and throw us some stars and a positive review that helps people find the show. You can tweet about the show and, and we also

just love when, you know, you tweet at us either your reactions to the show or ideas. We've gotten some great ideas for episodes from listeners and the Twitter handle is at, have you heard?

Berkshire And if you do want to hang around and join us In the Weeds, that's the special area we do for our Patreon subscribers, where Jack and I hold forth in some less prepared way on a topic that is of deep interest to at least one of us. I would love it if you did that in Jack, what is our topic for today?

Schneider I think that we should test out in the safe space that is In the Weeds. The idea I floated on Twitter, the other day of a do-over of you know, as the default, just sending all kids back to the grade they were in when the pandemic started. And man, some people were really mad about that, which, you know, that's, to me, that's always the sign of an idea worth thinking through a little bit, right. That it's, it's not something that everybody's just going to go along with. And so there's, there's clearly something there. So let's, let's poke around that idea a little bit. And then if it works, maybe we'll do an episode. And if it doesn't, then you know, only our subscribers have heard us talk about it.

Berkshire You're on sir. For everybody else, we'll be back in two weeks. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider

Berkshire This is Have You Heard.