

Anthony Comegna ([00:00](#)):

A few weeks ago here on Ideas in Progress, we shamelessly ripped audio from IHS's Speak for a Sandwich Series to use on our own show. But no, that wasn't just us taking the easy way out for a week because today, Historian Marcus Witcher rejoins the show for a bit of follow-up to his lecture on Ronald Reagan and for us to catch up with the almost breakneck speed at which he's rolling right through his next book. Let's get to it. Marcus Witcher's Ideas in Progress.

Anthony Comegna ([00:51](#)):

Okay, so Marcus, a few weeks ago here on the show, we played the audio from your recent Speak for a Sandwich, which you did here at the office. You talked to us about your recent book on the Reagan administration called Getting Right With Reagan. So as I understand it, your next book, the one you're working on now is about the Clinton administration. So I wonder if you could tell us sort of about why you decided to make that leap from one project to the other.

Marcus Witcher ([01:20](#)):

Yeah, I really appreciate you guys having me up to DC to give that talk. It was excellent to meet everybody. IHS has been so important to my academic and intellectual development. So it was really, really nice to be able to come up to DC and to give that talk.

Marcus Witcher ([01:34](#)):

My next book, as you sort of mentioned, is titled Fulfilling The Reagan Revolution: Clinton, Gingrich, and The Conservative 90s. And I think that the title really sort of encapsulates what the argument is. My argument is that really we should view 1980 to 2001, really until 9/11/2001 as sort of this moment of sort of conservatism as triumphant. And the argument that I make in the new book, which I'm currently researching for, is that the 1990s were actually sort of the climax, if you will, the crescendo of conservatism that they got a lot done in the 1990s. Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, that Ronald Reagan wasn't able or willing to actually accomplish in the 1980s.

Anthony Comegna ([02:19](#)):

So what kinds of examples would that be then? Because by now I mean, well, maybe I should back up a second. As you know, I'm a 19th century guy. That's my wheelhouse as a historian and for me, as a lot of people in our generation, the '80s and the '90s is kind of that black hole period that you never got to in class. And there might've been a few pages at the end of the textbook about it, but we never really learned much about that period. It might as well sort of not have happened and all of a sudden history starts with 9/11 or something like that or with the Lewinsky debacle or something.

Anthony Comegna ([03:00](#)):

And so from my experience of the political debate right now, you would think that the Clinton era was what gave us sort of the big government Democrats of today and the sort of war hawk Republicans. And yet I hear Bernie Sanders supporters, people in the far left, for example, making exactly the kind of argument it sounds like you're making. So how do we sort of square the ongoing dialogue about the legacy of the '90s?

Marcus Witcher ([03:40](#)):

Yeah. I think that the progressive left is absolutely correct that the 1990s were actually a conservative decade and that Bill Clinton would not be welcome in today's democratic party. I don't think there's any place on the stage for him, for instance, in the debates that are currently going on. He would look way, way more conservative than anybody currently on the stage. And so to get to your question about when do you sort of start writing about the 1990s, we're now 20 years on from the Clinton administration. 28 from the beginning of it or 29 right from the beginning of it. And so I think that we're in a place now where a lot of the sources are becoming available. Now if I was doing some really in depth foreign policy book, those sources aren't going to be available for an extended period of time.

Marcus Witcher ([04:32](#)):

But since I'm more interested in Clinton's domestic policies and the ways in which he sort of carried on sort of what I think of as sort of the conservatism in the 1980s, I'm able to get those sources pretty easily from the Clinton Library, from the Gingrich Papers at the University of West Georgia, et cetera.

Marcus Witcher ([04:50](#)):

But I think that the Sanders people are actually correct that the Clinton years were a really conservative sort of time period in that Bill Clinton represented what they might call neoliberalism. This sort of a bogeyman term. That he represented sort of free market, international trade rights, had supported NAFTA, but he also deregulated the banking industry. If you think about the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act of 1999, which removed Glass Steagall, which of course Elizabeth Warren is calling for again. He also deregulated telecommunications in 1996. He allowed for branch banking in 1994 with the Riegle-Neal Interstate Banking and Branching Efficiency Act, and of course like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders would point to a lot of that deregulation as supposedly what caused the 2008 financial crisis.

Marcus Witcher ([05:43](#)):

And so I think that Clinton actually has a lot more in common with say, the policies of Jimmy Carter in terms of his deregulation policies and the policies of Ronald Reagan from the 1980s than he has in common with someone like Elizabeth Warren or someone like Bernie Sanders. And it should be noted that Progressive's in the '90s weren't all that pleased with president Clinton after the 1994 midterms. So he had to fight against his party oftentimes to get things like NAFTA passed, but then of course, to get more significant things, not that NAFTA was insignificant, but to get things like welfare reform passed and the balanced budget passed in 1997, he had to really fight against sort of what we call old Democrats in the house.

Anthony Comegna ([06:29](#)):

Now, how strong then was the sort of identity politics movement at the time, or when did that actually start impacting democratic politics in a serious way? Because it seems to me, given your arguments here and again the little bit that I know about this modern period, it seems to me that Clinton understood that a lot of democratic voters are actually pretty conservative. Think about the black community for example.

Marcus Witcher ([07:03](#)):

Right.

Anthony Comegna ([07:04](#)):

Such strong links to the church and to traditional ways of living and notions about gender roles and sexuality and other things are very deeply inherent in the black community. And I think maybe a lot of people on the stage today, in this latest election cycle maybe don't quite realize that and they're kind of driving apart it seems that coalition that Clinton was able to pull together.

Marcus Witcher ([07:36](#)):

Yeah. I think that identity politics existed in the 1990s. I mean if you think of Jesse Jackson, the Rainbow Coalition, if you think of... These things exist in the '90s and Clinton had to sort of skirt around them, and he was lambasted by Jesse Jackson in the 1992 election for moving to the right on sort of issues such as like you think of crime and our law and order type sort of policies. Clinton famously, he flew back to Arkansas in order to oversee the execution of a prisoner to demonstrate that he was tough on crime. Clinton really wanted to stay away in the 1992 election from being identified along the lines that you're talking about today, sort of being identified with Jesse Jackson too strongly. And being identified with this sort of, I don't know exactly what to call it, these sort of identity politics of sort of like the new left, if you will. He wanted to kind of avoid that.

Marcus Witcher ([08:41](#)):

During his first two years in office, he actually jumped right into it in terms of trying to allow homosexual soldiers to be able to serve openly in the military. It was a campaign promise and so he sort of jumped into it and got defined along those is like an ultra liberal by conservatives. And he never would really be able to regain his sort of centrist label with most conservatives. But he by and large tried to avoid those types of politics after 1994 and really tried to build, when he could, a sort of a moderate coalition of Republicans and Democrats to get his fiscal policies passed in his, as I said before, his sort of policies on crime. And of course he signed into law DOMA, right? The Defense of Marriage Act. He signed him into law the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which attempted to ban pornography from the internet. In some ways, he actually was pretty conservative in terms of the legislation that we see passed.

Marcus Witcher ([09:47](#)):

And I think personally for Bill Clinton, those were strategic decisions, strategic political decisions on his part rather than things that he deeply believed. I think that in his sort of heart, he was very much pro gay individuals being able to practice their sexuality and embrace their sexuality without being discriminated against. But the politics of the 1990s didn't allow him to really plant a flag on that issue.

Anthony Comegna ([10:20](#)):

Now is your argument that the Clinton administration and sort of his wing of the democratic party was purposefully trying to do some kind of fulfillment of the Reagan Revolution, or were they more like pushed and compelled that way just by the politics of the era?

Marcus Witcher ([10:40](#)):

Yeah, it's the latter. Bill Clinton definitely did not see himself as Reagan's heir in any sense of the word or any meaning of the term. He did not see himself as fulfilling like the Reagan Revolution in any way. But I think one of Reagan's greatest accomplishments was that he changed the political discourse in the 1980s to where we sort of quit talking about what people were entitled to and started talking about sort of what rights do individuals have as citizens and what sort of... If that makes any sense. We sort of shifted.

Marcus Witcher ([11:16](#)):

If you read the book called *Age of Fracture* by Daniel Rogers, he talks about this sort of shift towards a rights based political discourse in the '90s. And Clinton really embraced that political discourse, and he embraced the idea that markets were the best way to organize society. Markets were the most efficient way to combat, for instance, environmental issues. Vice President Al Gore will come up with solutions to environmental challenges, but they'll always be with a market component. Likewise, healthcare. Bill Clinton, when he addressed healthcare, didn't go with his wife and many members of his team who wanted the universal healthcare system. He actually embraced something called managed competition, which encouraged basically market competition rather than extensive regulation, et cetera. Now by the time that bill actually got through sort of to Congress, it looked a lot like universal government run and regulated healthcare. But his goal at the time was actually to basically introduce more market competition into the healthcare sector in order to drive down costs and increase quality.

Marcus Witcher ([12:22](#)):

And so a lot of what Clinton does in the '90s is a reaction to how dominant conservatives had been over the previous 12 years. And so I don't think that he saw himself as Reagan's heir in any, any sort of sense of that term. But he was influenced, if you will, by sort of the intellectual currents that were rippling out from what we call the Reagan Revolution. And so as a result, he ends up balancing the budget. He gets welfare reform done. He gets a line item veto passed, which ultimately is found to be unconstitutional. He deregulates. I don't know if he deregulated more than Reagan, but it's definitely on par with Reagan. I'd have to look at the data on that to see. He ultimately puts NAFTA into effect, which then started the efforts that started under Reagan, and then of course it continued. George H.W. Bush did most of the heavy lifting. Reagan, or excuse me, Clinton ultimately puts that into place.

Marcus Witcher ([13:22](#)):

And so I think that on those economic issues, those economic policies, he very much ultimately ends up in a place that's not that dissimilar from where Ronald Reagan was. Now, having said that, he blamed Reagan for the fact that he had to balance the budget. He gets into office, he realizes there are massive deficits, and so he's frustrated. He's like, "This is going to kill my agenda of tax cuts for the middle class. It's going to kill my infrastructure projects." And he was right. It did. And so he ultimately embraced a deficit reduction not to sort of impress the bond markets. And that deficit reduction ultimately led to, along with technological innovation, eight years of economic growth.

Anthony Comegna ([14:06](#)):

Now I'm sure you're familiar with somebody like Gordon Wood's argument about the radicalism of the American revolution, that it really was a radical event. And yes, it wasn't really fulfilled in the years after the Revolution, but it opened up so much historical space for change that it's a revolution constantly in the process of fulfillment.

Marcus Witcher ([14:28](#)):

That's right.

Anthony Comegna ([14:30](#)):

And your book, your working title here makes me wonder, well, was the Reagan Revolution ever actually fulfilled at some point? And what is the current status of it?

Marcus Witcher ([14:41](#)):

Yeah, so I don't think that the Reagan Revolution was ever fulfilled, at least not fully. I think that in the '90s if you see the four years of balanced budgets at the end of 1990s, you see sort of Reagan's vision for a small... You see Reagan's vision for, he wanted balanced budget, massive tax cuts, a robust military to fight the Cold War, and he wanted to get inflation under control because of course that was one of the major concerns in 1981 when he took office. And he's able to accomplish three of those four during his time in office. He gets his tax cuts through, dramatically decreasing the rates. He builds up the military at the end of the Cold War, and he also is able, through Paul Volcker, it should be mentioned. Paul Volcker is able to get inflation under control and it leads to eight years, seven years of, six, seven years of economic prosperity in the 1980s.

Marcus Witcher ([15:36](#)):

The last one, the balanced budget was incompatible with those other things. And so I think that if we think of that as the Reagan Revolution or as four components of it, we do see the balance budgets get passed in the '90s. But Reagan's larger sort of ideological goal of sort of decreasing the size and scope of government, getting it sort of out of people's lives has to be said that that was a failure. He did not revolutionize the American governmental system in the same way to say FDR did. FDR begins the creation of the administrative state, which has continued and was maybe only stalled for a short period of time in the 1980s and the 1990s. And now has continued in the post 2001, post 9/11 era. And so I think that the Reagan Revolution ultimately was not fulfilled and the larger goal of it to actually decrease the size and scope of government and get it out of Americans' lives has to be seen as, in 2020, as being a failure, especially with somebody like President Trump at the head of the Republican party.

Anthony Comegna ([16:48](#)):

No, I, I wonder if we could pivot here for a little bit to talk sort of about this kind of nagging methodological question I have for you because I often say that I think that for something to be the proper subject of history, whoever's writing about it, the historian in question should not have been alive during the time of the events they're discussing. They should be personally separated from the events and the people, the figures that they're talking about. Preferably the subject of history should be outside of living memory for anybody around today.

Anthony Comegna ([17:33](#)):

And my point of view on that is just that it minimizes distortion, from the historian's personal influences during that period, whatever they might've been and you get a fair amount of detachment and objectivity to whatever degree it is that historians can actually obtain that. It helps if you're not personally connected to the subject you're discussing. So I wonder how do you navigate those kinds of problems? How do you make sure that you're not just looking, for example, at one of these presidential libraries and they're very highly curated collections? How do you know that you're not just doing some form of propaganda?

Marcus Witcher ([18:21](#)):

Yeah, I mean, it's a really good question, and one that my graduate school friends would really appreciate you asking considering they all work in the 19th century and used to give me a hard time because my sources are often times digital and searchable in terms of the newspapers that I use, which brings about some other sort of questions about methodology and whatnot. But I would have to say that I don't disagree with you that if you weren't alive, or if the event that you were studying was

outside of living memory, that there probably would be fewer distortions. You wouldn't have to deal with the same challenges that say a historian like myself has to deal with when writing about the 1990s. Although I guess from my point of view, I'm not for sure that historians are capable of being completely detached. And I don't think that you would claim that either from the subject matter that they're studying.

Marcus Witcher ([19:18](#)):

And so what I would say is that I wasn't actually alive. I was not actually alive during the Reagan administration. I was born in 1989 just before the Wall fell. And so I actually wasn't alive during the Reagan administration. So I guess I'm good on that one. My first book is legitimate. It can stand. Getting Right With Reagan doesn't have to be recalled, but the book on Clinton, I was a young during the 90s as well and have very few memories from the 1990s. And so I guess I would say both of these projects, I don't think that I have a whole lot of personal sort of memories about the time that I'm studying.

Marcus Witcher ([19:59](#)):

But then I guess I would push back and say that I think that regardless of whether we like it or not, Anthony, someone's going to write the history of the 1980s, 1990s, the 2000s, even the time that we're in now. And they're going to write what I call the first draft of history. If you think of Arthur Schlesinger writing in the 1960s, he was not impartial by any stretch of the imagination to what was happening in the Kennedy administration. And he got a lot wrong. He got a lot wrong. And maybe we have a discussion about whether or not his books are a value. But somebody's going to write this sort of first draft to history. And I think it's important that the first draft history be framed in a way that is impartial, at least to the extent that it can be.

Marcus Witcher ([20:47](#)):

I myself am a really, really deep contextualist. So I think that you have to sort of view your actors in the time period that they existed in. You can't view them from 2020. Even Bill Clinton, you need to view Bill Clinton from 1995, 1996, or whenever it is that you're sort of looking at his policies. And so I'm a deep contextualist, it's just as I'm sure you are, just like Bernard Bailyn was or is, excuse me, just like Gordon Wood is. I'm part of that sort of deep contextualist school. So you have to actually have the sources. The sources actually have to say what you say they're saying. I'm not a big fan of sort of reading into the silences to determine meaning and whatnot.

Marcus Witcher ([21:28](#)):

And so when I write these books about the 1980s and the 1990s, my goal is to do the best I possibly can at sort of being detached and trying to come up with sort of an idea of what actually happened.

Marcus Witcher ([21:44](#)):

Now having said that, and I guess this is maybe where you and I might disagree is I actually think that history is extraordinarily important for the present, and it should inform the present. So it has two tasks: to understand people in the past, but also to inform important questions in the present. Because if all we do is recount what happened in the past and don't sort of connect it to the problems of our own day, then I think we're doing a disservice to our field and also to the public. And so I see my books as an attempt to look at what happened in the 1980s, and I'm almost always trying to answer questions that are a product of our moment in history and our moment in time.

Marcus Witcher ([22:24](#)):

In the case of the Clinton book, I'm looking at sort of like a different type of democratic party and trying to understand sort of the possibilities of that moment. And I think it does to a certain extent speak to some of the problems that we face today, like our inability to work together to get important legislation passed. Maybe we can learn something from Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton. Who would've thought we'd look back at the '90s and think of it as this time of bipartisanship? It definitely didn't seem like that in the '90s to people, but they did get a lot of legislation done or a lot of legislation passed. And so I guess this sort of in short, I think that we write history to inform and try to speak to our current moment at least to some extent, as well as trying to contextualize the past.

Anthony Comegna ([23:17](#)):

Well, so I think you're right and I guess you have caused me to go ahead and soften my view here because I think the important thing is that like you're trying. And it is going to be more difficult if you are just temporarily closer to the subject and if you did have to sort of grow up in a world, for example, with an ongoing political dialogue about this era and its impact on the present. It's going to be a lot more to kind of cut through. But like you said, if you take a careful set of methods and deploy that, you can minimize some of these inherent methodological problems just by doing that. But there is at some point going to have to be somebody who is the first proper academic historian on the scene here so to speak.

Anthony Comegna ([24:07](#)):

And it also strikes me that in a way that just the production of history, the timeline of it is speeding up the further we go through time because now you have dozens of books out the year an election is going on and then immediately afterward and then you have a whole slew of books about the different periods in the new administration and scandals and turnover and all of this. Everybody's book comes out and it's a big deal. And so those are, in a way, the first drafts of history getting produced right away, sent out to hundreds of thousands of people or whatever or at least held in giant crates in a publishing office.

Marcus Witcher ([24:49](#)):

Yeah. And then it's our task to try to sift through all of that five, 10, 15 years, however many years down the road and try to sort of reconcile and to address some of the myths that are created. And then it becomes almost more difficult in a sense because you have to get through that first generation of historiography, which is oftentimes produced by sort of popular historians and also journalists where a lot of it isn't necessarily accurate.

Anthony Comegna ([25:21](#)):

Or worse it's even the politicians themselves going ahead and writing their memoirs very early in an attempt to get a better position to run next time.

Marcus Witcher ([25:34](#)):

That's right.

Anthony Comegna ([25:35](#)):

Go see my book. Yeah. No, I don't envy you actually the mountains of evidence because sifting through all that must be a chore. Let me tell you, I feel nice situated in the 19th century. I'm right in between the

modern historian and the medievalist different dilemmas of a mountain of evidence versus no evidence at all. And I get the sweet spot.

Marcus Witcher ([25:58](#)):

Yeah. And I think that that does lend itself to a certain type of history as well because I do have a mountain of evidence. When I go to the Reagan Library or when I go to the Clinton Library, as I'm doing with my current book project, what do you choose to look at? You have to choose. And so that means you're already framing the narrative before you ever look at a significant amount of the evidence. And so that in and of itself, we think back to Hayden White. I'm sure you've had to read some Hayden White in graduate school. Like the way in which we formed the narratives affects what the stories that we tell. If we're going to continue down this sort of like methodological path, which to a certain extent creates a certain type of narrative, which could potentially create distortion.

Marcus Witcher ([26:42](#)):

I guess my only solace is that there are so many of us historians, there are so many people writing that eventually through the marketplace of ideas, through all these imperfect works, I do think that readers, if they're really, really trying can discern truth through sort of the mountain of different perspectives. And that's always my hope. I'm sure I got things wrong in *Getting Right With Reagan*. I'm not aware of what those things are, but I'm sure that I did get things wrong in that book. But I hope that encourages a larger dialogue about the Reagan administration and the questions that I pose. And so I think between all of us, I do think we're able to glean truth, but it's definitely a process.

Anthony Comegna ([27:27](#)):

My heartiest and most heartfelt thanks to Professor Witcher for joining us this week. Be sure to check out his book *Getting Right With Reagan*. And if you'd like to read even more from Marcus, check out the Reagan and Clinton chapters he wrote for a series I've been editing for the Cato Institute called *Everything Wrong With The Presidents*. You can find that in more at [www.libertarianism.org](http://www.libertarianism.org). And until next week, keep the progress coming.