

By [David Marchese](#)

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For more than four decades, Robert Reich has been ringing the alarm bell about rising inequality in America. He did it as a member of three presidential administrations, including a stint as labor secretary under President Clinton. He did it as a revered professor at U.C. Berkeley, Brandeis and Harvard. He's currently doing it online, where, somewhat improbably, the 79-year-old has become a new-media star, having built a devoted audience of millions across Substack, TikTok and Instagram. Through it all, his message has remained consistent: Inequality — be it economic, racial or political — erodes social trust, diminishes belief in democracy and can create openings for demagogues.

Which is why I wanted to talk to Reich about this political moment, one defined in so many ways by a widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and also by growing resistance to that trend. Think here of the economic populist messaging coming from some Republicans, like Josh Hawley, or the rise of young and charismatic politicians who focus on income inequality, people like the democratic socialists Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Zohran Mamdani, who won New York City's Democratic mayoral primary just a few days after Reich and I first spoke.

But I also wanted to talk to Reich about the personal moment in which he finds himself. He recently retired from teaching after more than 40 years. Indeed, the run-up to his final lecture is the subject of a documentary, "The Last Class," which is

currently in theaters. Reich also has a memoir on the way, “Coming Up Short,” which will be published on Aug. 5. In the book, and in our conversation, he reckons with the political failures of his fellow baby boomers, the rise of what he sees as a culture of brutality and bullying and why Democrats have failed to connect with struggling Americans.

The title of your memoir is a pun on the fact that you’re short, but it also refers to your argument that your generation failed to strengthen democracy, failed to reduce economic inequality and, generally, failed to contain “the bullies.” What went wrong? We took for granted what our parents and their parents bequeathed to us. I was born in 1946, as were George W. Bush and Bill Clinton and Donald Trump. The so-called greatest generation gave us not only peace and prosperity but the largest middle class the world had ever seen. What I try to understand is how we ended up with Donald Trump. Trump is the consequence, not the cause, of what we are now experiencing. He is the culmination of at least 50 years of a certain kind of neglect. And I say this very personally, because I was part of this failure. It is a reckoning that is deeply personal.



Reich serving as secretary of labor under President Clinton in 1993. Credit...Marcy Nighswander/Associated Press

But how useful is the generational frame? Because alongside the shortcomings, baby boomers helped reduce racial discrimination, grew the environmental movement, bolstered feminism and gay rights and helped to shepherd along giant technological advances. So is it really accurate to describe the problem as a “generational” failure? Or is the issue more that conservative politics, which plenty of baby boomers have always held, have won some significant victories over the last 50 years? It’s not fair to blame a generation, but I think it is fair to say there has been, in America, a failure to appreciate the importance of democracy, the importance of holding back big money. Because as inequality has gotten worse and worse, the middle class has by many measures shrunk. That is an open invitation for corruption. We see more and more big money undermining our democratic

institutions. We could not have stayed on the path we were on even if Trump hadn't come along. We were opening ourselves to, if not a demagogue, then something like a demagogue, because so many people became so angry and were convinced even before Trump that the system was rigged against them. I don't want to minimize the good things that have happened over the past 70 years, but the fact of the matter is we ended up with a very large number of Americans who feel that the American system and the promise of America was a sham.

I think people have some sense of what economic inequality means in the abstract, but can you make it a bit more concrete? I'm talking about the extraordinary inequalities of not just income and wealth but the inequalities that *stem* from inequalities of income and wealth. Inequalities of access to a good education, racial inequalities, class inequalities. But basically, I see bullying as central to inequality getting out of control. That is, certain people have control over other people in ways that enable them to brutalize those people. When inequality gets out of control, as it has, we eventually get a bully in chief, named Donald Trump.

Can you tell me why bullies and bullying have such heat for you? Well, I am very short. I've never reached over 4-foot-11. When I was a kid, I was bullied, made fun of, humiliated to the point where I feared going to school. The bullying made me so deeply afraid in so many aspects of my early life. It undermined my sense of personal security and self-worth. I found that if I had a couple of older boys to protect me from the bullies, that would help — people I latched onto because I knew that they were kind.



Reich in his childhood bedroom in South Salem, N.Y. Credit...From Robert Reich

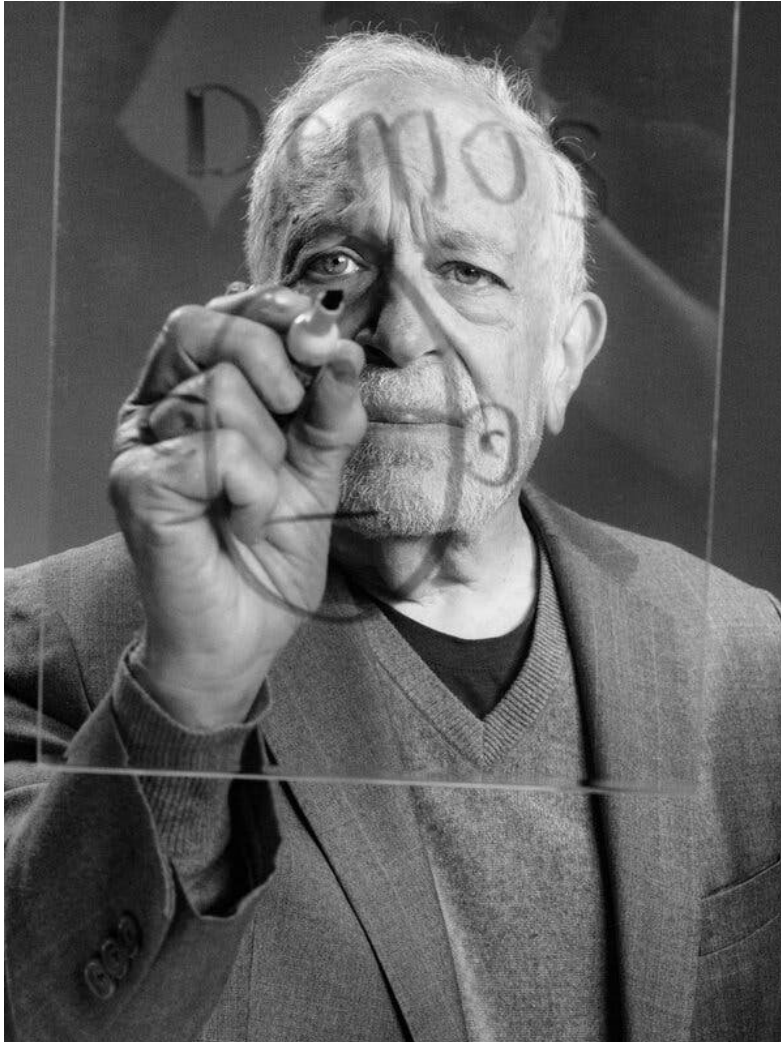
One of those boys was named Mickey. I don't recall him ever actually interceding on my behalf, but he exuded kindness. Long story short: Mickey was a civil rights worker. His full name was Michael Schwerner, and he, along with two other civil rights workers, were brutally murdered in the summer of 1964, as I entered college. I had lost track of Mickey entirely, and when I heard that the person who had protected me from the bullies had been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, in many ways it changed my life. It made me see bullying not just in terms of the toughs in my elementary school but in terms of the powerful against the powerless, people who desperately needed protection from those who abused their power.

Now, in any society there's always going to be the more powerful and the less powerful. There's always going to be inequality. Some inequality is not bad. In fact, it may be necessary to give people the appropriate incentives to work hard and innovate, but at some point, we tip over into a culture that is a brutal culture. That's what I discovered, particularly when I was secretary of labor: When I looked at what was happening in America, at the people who were losing good jobs, at the decline of unionized jobs, I began to see that economic bullying was a central aspect of late-20th, early-21st-century America.

In a bigger-picture sense, are there reliable strategies for dealing with economic bullies? If you're an average working person today, you are extraordinarily vulnerable. Nobody is protecting you. This is one of the attractions that Donald Trump wittingly or unwittingly presented in 2016 and continues to present. He has provided an explanation for people who have been economically and socially brutalized and bullied. An explanation that is, by the way, completely wrong and that has to do with immigrants and the deep state and transgender people. Part of the book is my attempt to help the Democrats, or at least the progressives, see that the way forward is to talk truthfully about why it is that so many people are powerless and bullied and feel so vulnerable and so angry.

What's your diagnosis for why Democrats have struggled to do that? Some Democrats don't want to tell the true story of concentrated wealth and power because they are drinking at the same trough as Republicans. This quandary has been growing since I was in my 20s, beginning to watch money and politics and the Faustian bargain that the Democrats were making. The Democrats want to be on the side of social justice and fairness and equal opportunity and political equality, and yet some Democrats — I don't want to tar with too broad a brush here — are taking money and don't want to bite the hands that feed them. I've seen it personally. I saw it when I was at the Federal Trade Commission; I saw it when I was at the Justice Department working in the Ford administration; I saw it very close up when I was in the Clinton administration and then at a distance when I was providing some advice to Barack Obama. One of the frustrating things about writing this book and reliving these years is that I came across memos and letters and videos of me at that time saying over and

over again, like a broken record, “If we stay on this path, we are going to find ourselves in the not-too-distant future with a demagogue, and our democracy is going to be threatened.”



Credit...Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

If some Democrats are drinking from the same trough as the Republicans, how would Democrats then authentically find common ground with working people who are struggling? Democrats would point to the large corporations in this country, to their monopolistic practices, their antilabor practices, to all sorts of things that they are doing that are keeping the rest of America poorer. Democrats would do what Bernie Sanders and A.O.C. and Elizabeth Warren have done quite effectively. It strikes me as a little crazy that the Democrats are divided between the establishment Democrats, who I call corporate Democrats, and the progressive Democrats. Why aren't *all* Democrats progressive Democrats? Who in the world needs corporate Democrats when you have a Republican Party that is pretty good at representing big corporations, even though it now has a facade of populism?

Do you see positive energy in figures like A.O.C. or Zohran Mamdani, who I assume are the kind of progressive Democrats that you support? I see them as the future of the Democratic Party, assuming that they appeal to working people. My fear is that they will not. Or at least, that they will be carried in the currents of progressive politics, which right now are overwhelmingly college graduates in urban and coastal centers. That's not bad, but you have to be inclusive. You have to include the working class and the poor.

You're popular on TikTok, Instagram and Substack. Do you have a sense of the demographics of your audience on those platforms? No, I don't, but I'm always worried that I'm not getting through to the people who I would like to get through to: working-class people who feel disenfranchised and alienated from the American system. What's the best way of actually reaching these people? Fox News and Newsmax — they play upon and exploit the anger that was already there. I go into this in some detail in the book because Rush Limbaugh and Roger Ailes were working contemporaneously with me. I talked to Roger Ailes about what he wanted to achieve with Fox News. It was clear to me that he was building upon discontent and anger, as was Rush Limbaugh before him. I don't want to suggest that it was purely cynical on their parts — maybe they believed in what they were doing — but from what I saw, it seemed to be very cynical indeed.

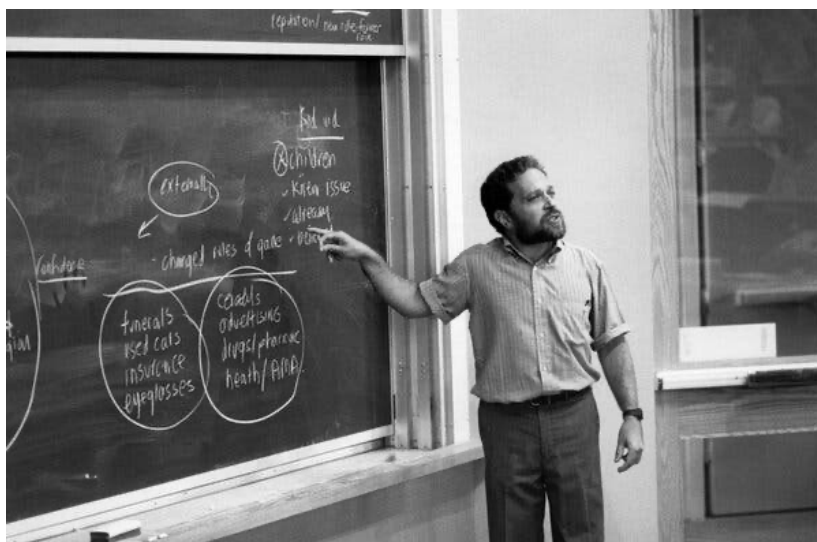


On TikTok and other social media platforms, Reich warns about the dangers of inequality to an audience of millions. Credit...Screenshot from TikTok

Minus the cynicism, is there anything you could have learned from how Roger Ailes and Rush Limbaugh communicated? I did learn that humor was very important. Also, what Limbaugh and Ailes understood is that satire is critically important. I don't really do that. I don't want to be meanspirited. The line between satire and meanspiritedness is very vague, and you can lose sight of yourself in terms of not going over that line. But they did it well.

You taught at universities for 40-some years. Are there ways in which your students changed any of your fundamental beliefs? It became more and more important over the years not to give students *my* opinions. I wanted *them* to do the work. I asked them to find people who disagreed with them and told them over and over again that this is the best way of learning. The worst kind of learning environment is a learning environment in which everybody agrees politically or there's an overwhelming consensus culturally or in terms of economics or politics. Because then you don't have anybody to headbang against. At some of the places I've taught — Harvard and Brandeis and certainly Berkeley — that is one of the biggest obstacles to learning.

I went on RateMyProfessors.com and looked up what students had to say about you. A majority of evaluations were extremely positive, but there were a handful of students who said things to the effect of "This professor's class is great if you only want to hear a left-wing perspective." Which echoes what you were saying about the problem of consensus. How would the problem of ideological consensus in academia be addressed? That particular issue has got to be viewed with a little more specificity. There is a larger cultural set of assumptions that have to do with people who are likely to go to college. Those cultural assumptions are very cosmopolitan, very literate, very inclusive — at least on the surface — but they tend also to be prejudicial against people who are from families that are not college-educated. I certainly found this at Harvard, to a lesser extent at Brandeis. I don't really find it at Berkeley. But there is a kind of cultural snobbery. To the extent that there's a problem, it lies in the culture of inequality in which we now find ourselves as a country. The best way of overcoming that is to make it possible for either everybody to go to college or to reduce the demands that people go to college. It's a terrible conceit that the only avenue into the middle class today is through a four-year college degree.



Reich teaching at the Harvard Kennedy School in 1985. Credit...Martha Stewart/Harvard Kennedy School

Who do you talk to when you're looking for opposing opinions? [Alan Simpson](#) was one of my dearest friends — the former senator from Wyoming. He viewed public policy in very different ways than I did. He was a deficit hawk. I was never a deficit hawk. But in our conversations, we laughed and we asked each other serious questions and we traded stories, and sometimes we discovered things that we didn't know. I wish there were more people like Alan Simpson.

Did he change your mind about anything? He did. I was out in Wyoming visiting him a few years ago, after the Trump administration had begun. He invited many of his friends and family to a dinner. I was surrounded by Republicans. Maybe there were 20 people around the table. They were all Republicans, and some of them were Trumpers, and they were, I think it's fair to say, absolutely lovely people. Generous and kind and totally enjoyable. Alan taught me that the humanity of people in Wyoming and in the center of this country and many, many Republicans is so much more important than whether they believe in Social Security.

We're talking a couple of days after Zohran Mamdani won the Democratic primary. He won all over the city. He won among different types of people. But Andrew Cuomo outperformed him with lower-income voters, despite the fact that Mamdani's whole shebang was affordability. What might explain that? This is the old saw: Lower-income voters tend not to read everything and absorb every piece of news, and they tend to be very impressed by the major endorsers. Bill Clinton endorsed Andrew Cuomo. So even though he talked about affordability a lot, that did not necessarily break through with low-income voters. Had he not talked about affordability, I think he would have done much worse, even with low-income voters.

Earlier this year, my colleague on the Interview, Lulu Garcia-Navarro, [interviewed](#) the Democratic senator Ruben Gallego, and he made a point that Americans don't necessarily begrudge the wealthy because they too would like to be wealthy, and Democratic messaging perhaps misses that in favor of an "eat the rich" philosophy. Is there something to that? That's utter B.S. It may have been the case in the '60s, '70s, '80s, maybe even early '90s, when the gap between the wealthy and everybody else was not a chasm. But it's now utterly ridiculous to make that point. The idea that the American dream is still alive is, for most people, a sham. They understand that hard work and obeying all the rules is not going to get them much, particularly since the financial crisis of 2008. They saw the banks get bailed out, millions of them lost their jobs, their savings, their homes. Obama had almost no program for helping homeowners who were underwater. They're angry about the system being rigged against them. They know it is.

You shared that story about going to a dinner party at the home of Alan Simpson, and how you were pleasantly surprised by the fact that these Trump supporters that were there with you turned out to be lovely people. Is there some point at which people stop being lovely if they also support a politician who you see as a detestable bully? It's a very complicated and good question. I would guess that most Trump supporters are good people and nice people, and they probably love their families and are patriotic. They have been sold a bill of goods by a con man, by a malignant narcissist who has come along at a very dangerous point in this country's history. I'm not blaming them. I blame Trump and his lackeys and the people around him, and Republicans in the House and the Senate. I can't imagine what they tell each other or even tell themselves in the morning when they're putting their lapel pins on, looking in the mirror.

Director of photography (video): Aaron Katter

***[David Marchese](#)** is a writer and co-host of [The Interview](#), a regular series featuring influential people across culture, politics, business, sports and beyond.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/26/magazine/robert-reich-interview.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>