

Charles Reich, author of 1970 bestseller 'The Greening of America,' dies at 91

By [Matt Schudel](#)

June 18

For a brief time in the early 1970s, Charles Reich was one of the most famous writers and teachers in America. He was a Yale Law School professor who taught a popular undergraduate course, "The Individual in America," that attracted more than 600 students per session.

Sensing a new spirit of enlightenment in the youth revolution of the 1960s, he put his observations into a 1970 book, "The Greening of America," that sold millions of copies and became one of the defining manifestos of the era of hippies, psychedelic music and love beads.

The book, which described a new level of consciousness ushered in by young people who defied conventional expectations, was both admired and reviled. Mr. Reich grew his hair long and moved to San Francisco, trying to hold on to his privacy and dignity, even as he became an intellectual punching bag for a generation of conservative writers who considered him the personification of everything that went wrong with the '60s.

Except for the occasional book or classroom appearance, Mr. Reich had largely retreated from the public eye before his death June 15 in a San Francisco hospital. He was 91.

His death was confirmed by a niece, Alice Reich, who did not cite a specific cause.

Mr. Reich (the "ch" is pronounced "sh") began his career as a Supreme Court law clerk and a corporate lawyer in Washington before returning to New Haven, Conn., to join the faculty of Yale Law School, his alma mater.

In 1964, he wrote an influential legal article, "The New Property," suggesting that certain government benefits could be construed as the property of the people receiving them. For many years, it was the most widely cited article ever published in the Yale Law Journal, and it formed the theoretical framework of a 1970 Supreme Court decision, *Goldberg v. Kelly*, requiring welfare recipients to receive a hearing before their benefits could be denied.

But Mr. Reich's restless mind was not satisfied by the confines of the law. He chafed under the conformity of the 1950s and grew exhilarated by what he considered the cultural flowering of the '60s, as idealistic young people rejected the standards of the past, from fashion and music to politics and personal fulfillment.

At Yale, Mr. Reich enrolled in literature courses and called for the humanities to be taught to law students.

"Through his standing-room-only course for undergraduates called 'The Individual in America,' " one of his former students, Don Oldenburg, wrote in The Washington Post in 1987, "the gangly and oddly endearing professor gained campus renown as a reluctant prophet. Yalies called him 'Charlie' and saw him as an intellectual crossbreed of

Emerson and Whitman, with a predilection for the expression ‘Oh, wow.’ High-mindedness made him appear to defy gravity when he’d stroll through the Yale courtyards.”

Mr. Reich spent the summer of 1967 — the “Summer of Love” — in Berkeley, Calif., where he caught the scent of marijuana and the sound of rock music in the air.

“In Berkeley, on the streets, I saw a revolution — a generation in revolt, a reversal of the corporate state under way,” he told *The Post* in 1970. He declared marijuana “a maker of revolution, a truth serum.”

Mr. Reich began working on a book in which he defined three states of evolving cultural values in America. The first, which he called Consciousness I, was the spirit of individualism and self-reliance of the revolutionary era.

The second level of consciousness represented the 20th century’s prevailing belief in technology, corporate hierarchy and social order.

The final stage, or Consciousness III, was a new era of enlightenment marked by peace, understanding and a nonviolent sense of cooperation.

“This is the revolution of the new generation,” he wrote. “It is both necessary and inevitable, and in time it will include not only youth, but all people in America.”

When Mr. Reich’s manuscript languished at a publishing house, his mother showed it to a friend, [Lillian Ross](#), a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine. She passed it along to the magazine’s editor (and her lover), William Shawn, who published a long excerpt in September 1970. The *New Yorker* received an unprecedented number of letters, and “The Greening of America” quickly appeared in book form, selling 250,000 copies in hard cover and millions more in paperback.

The book, which was largely a social critique along the lines of David Riesman’s “The Lonely Crowd” or John Kenneth Galbraith’s “The Affluent Society,” was sometimes erroneously thought to be about the environment. Mr. Reich chose the title “The Greening of America” to symbolize a vibrant cultural upheaval that, he wrote, “emerged out of the wasteland of the Corporate State, like flowers pushing up through the concrete pavement.”

Even though he refused to appear on TV talk shows, Mr. Reich became a cultural phenomenon. Interviewers followed him to his campus hangout for coffee, his classes at Yale were oversubscribed — his students included Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham — and he even helped interview the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia for *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Some of the reviews of “The Greening of America” were laudatory, but the loudest voices were from those who despised the book — and, in a larger sense, what the youth rebellion of the 1960s stood for. The kinder critics found Mr. Reich naive in his acceptance of the virtue of youth.

“Professor Reich writes like a Madison Avenue public relations officer who has been given the hippy account,” journalist Peregrine Worsthorpe wrote in the *Spectator*, a British magazine. “What Charles Reich is peddling is a Peter Pan view of society, in which we can all live in a condition of permanent adolescence, never growing up.”

For decades, Mr. Reich continued to be singled out by conservative publications as a target for ideological potshots.

“Remember Charles Reich’s mongo bestseller, ‘The Greening of America’?” writer Amity Shlaes wrote in the Wall Street Journal in 1999, nearly three decades after the book was published. “Since then, Mr. Reich’s promise that the baby boomers would rework society into three stages of Consciousness has been revealed as so wacky that its principal value now is as a sort of joke.”

Charles Alan Reich was born May 20, 1928, in New York City. His father was a doctor, his mother an educator.

Mr. Reich received a bachelor’s degree in history in 1949 from Oberlin College in Ohio, then entered law school at Yale, graduating first in his class in 1952. He worked for a year at a New York law firm before coming to Washington as a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black.

Black’s first wife had recently died, and Mr. Reich and another law clerk rented rooms in the justice’s house in Alexandria, Va.

“My years with Justice Black were crucial,” Mr. Reich told The Post in 1970. “He was a man of ideas and ideals. We did everything together — cooked breakfast, washed dishes. Everything.”

He later joined the law firm of Arnold, Fortas & Porter, where he worked with Abe Fortas, a future Supreme Court justice. In 1960, Mr. Reich returned to Yale to teach.

By the time he published “The Greening of America,” he had largely abandoned his Brooks Brothers suits for beads, bell bottoms and shaggy hair.

In 1974, he left Yale and settled in San Francisco. He published a memoir, “The Sorcerer of Bolinas Reef” (1976), in which he revealed that he was gay. He had no immediate survivors.

He taught at law schools in California and returned to Yale from 1991 to 1995. His final book, “Opposing the System” (1995), a sharp critique of corporate influence in American life, was poorly received.

Mr. Reich never outlived the fame — or notoriety — that came with the book that helped shape a generation.

“A little of this fame thing goes a long way if you don’t know how to deal with it,” he told The Post in 1987. “One of the problems with fame, is they try to pigeonhole you . . . like I’m stuck with ‘The Greening of America’ for the rest of my life.”

Read more [Washington Post obituaries](#)

[Gloria Vanderbilt, socialite and designer-jeans marketer who was the subject of a sensational custody trial in the 1930s, dies at 95](#)

[Anthony Price, British author of thrillers with deep links to history, dies at 90](#)

[Franco Zeffirelli, master of grandeur in theater, film and opera, dies at 96](#)

Matt Schudel

Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. **Follow** 
