

## Von Bothmer, a Dominican professor and author, busts myths about 'liberal' '60s

Paul Liberatore

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Author Bernard von Bothmer

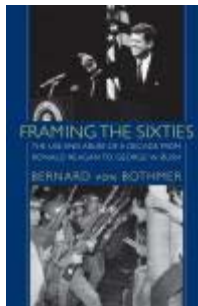
Bernard von Bothmer, a history teacher at Dominican University in San Rafael, has revived the emotional debate over the most explosive generation of our time - the 1960s.

In his highly opinionated new book, "Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush" (University of Massachusetts Press, \$28.95), von Bothmer paints a clear picture of how the conservative movement has defined the '60s - often falsely - for its own political purposes.

For example, von Bothmer writes about President Ronald Reagan, a member of the World War II generation, and his lies about President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" in the '60s.

"Reagan said over and over again that we had a war

on poverty and poverty won," von Bothmer said. "That is factually false. Poverty decreased from 20 percent to 12.5 percent in the '60s, during Johnson's Great Society. Poverty went down! But



Author Bernard von Bothmer's book, 'Framing the Sixties'

Reagan repeated that over and over and nobody called him on it."

The 43-year-old historian is believed to be the first to explore the notion of a "good" and "bad" '60s, the good being John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, all in the early part of the decade. And the bad being Vietnam War protests, student unrest, the counterculture, black power and urban revolts - spanning the late-'60s to the early '70s.

According to von Bothmer, Reagan was the one who really invented the concept of "the '60s" in order to bash liberals with everything he considered wrong about the decade.

"If you look at Reagan's rhetoric, he starts to talk about the '60s early on, and it's all bad," he said. "He can feel growing liberalism coming and wants to discredit it. It's kind of funny actually that he was angry about the '60s because they gave him his

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political career. Without the '60s, the right would not have risen. It might have been relegated to the ash heap of history, so to speak. But the '60s produced a counter-revolution that I would argue we're still in now."

Leading that counter revolution was none other than President George W. Bush, a draft-card-carrying baby boomer member of the '60s generation.

"Bush was accepted into Yale in the spring of 1964," von Bothmer notes. "He was the last hurrah for the prep school kids who could get into Yale without a lot of academic achievement. While he was at Yale that changed. And part of his animosity toward the '60s is his hostility toward the new admission criteria at Yale, which stressed academics rather than your social connections.

"It was no longer the Yale of the '50s and early '60s, and he was upset by that," von Bothmer continues. "My thesis is that what propelled his rise into politics later on was his anger toward the '60s. Even while he was president he had a hostile relationship with Yale and with intellectuals and, of course, with liberals in general. And it all dates back to Bush at Yale in the '60s."

In "Framing the Sixties," von Bothmer busts the myth that the majority of young people espoused liberal views and ideas in the '60s.

"Liberals like to say, 'Oh, why wasn't George W. Bush more involved in the '60s?," von Bothmer said. "Well, he was in the majority by being the frat boy he was, even in an activist place like Yale. Let's not forget that the greatest percentage of votes by young people in the 1968 presidential election were not for (Democrat) Hubert Humphrey. They were for (Republican) Richard Nixon or (Independent)

George Wallace. We have this myth that the boomers were this liberal group, when actually, in the 60s themselves, they voted conservatively."

Tom Brokaw, author of "The Greatest Generation," and "Boom! Talking About the Sixties," calls von Bothmer's book "a smart, important and impressively researched account of the decade that far too often is reduced to clichés by the Left and the Right."

And Georgetown University history professor Michael Kazin, co-author of "America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s," said, "This fine book illustrates the truth of the maxim that history is what the present wants to know about the past. To understand why the meaning of the 1960s remains a critical matter for both conservatives and liberals, von Bothmer's careful study is the place to start."

Contact Paul Liberatore via e-mail at [liberatore@marinij.com](mailto:liberatore@marinij.com) ; follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/LibLarge>

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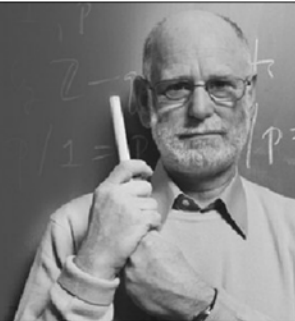
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