

"Framing the Sixties" examines conservative political myths

Former Stevenson teacher, historian, says narratives were built to discredit liberalism

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If you think the '60s are over and done with, Bernard von Bothmer invites you to turn on a cable news channel, tune in to a talk radio station or visit a political blog at random.

From the right, politicians assail President Barack Obama's domestic agenda as the return of the "big government" programs of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Pundits ask if Afghanistan will be Obama's Vietnam.

From the left, the civil rights movement of the '60s is invoked in the current fight for gay rights. And Obama was again compared to LBJ — this time in a favorable light — as part of the nation's polarizing health care reform debate.

"The '60s are alive and well today in presidential politics," said von Bothmer, who taught history at Stevenson School in Pebble Beach from 1997 to 2000 (others may also remember him as the soccer coach). "The decade is a lens we use to define politics."

"Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush" hit No. 13 in the presidential politics category on

Amazon.com last week, a pleasant surprise for von Bothmer, who now teaches history at University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California in San Rafael. He originally wrote the book as a Ph.D. thesis.

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."

In researching the book — which describes how an often false narrative about the '60s was developed by conservative presidential campaigns — von Bothmer interviewed 120 leading presidential advisers, speech writers and other presidential political players, including Edwin Meese, Robert Bork and Casper Weinberger on the right and Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn on the left.

"I wanted to run the gamut of political players in the last four decades," von Bothmer said.

What he found is that passions around the '60s still run high among insiders today. Several advisers who granted von Bothmer access, including Weinberger and Bork, said they could only give him 10 minutes of their time. An hour later, the subjects were still avidly talking, all on the record and on tape, von Bothmer said.

"Both the right and the left still talk very passionately about the '60s. Everyone has an opinion on the decade, which I think is why the book has really taken off."

As part of his research, von Bothmer looked at presidential speeches made since the Reagan administration, and then went back to the original drafts of those speeches and even interviewed

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speech writers to see how the speeches evolved. What emerged from extensive research, he said, was a distortion of history for political gain. The '60s were framed by conservatives, he said, as a time when the country's social fabric was destroyed by liberalism — a narrative that said the left made a mockery of patriotism, and that the emergence of big government foreshadowed the undoing of American values.

Von Bothmer said President Ronald Reagan was among the first to "run against the '60s," making claims about LBJ's "War on Poverty" that weren't true.

"Reagan said over and over again that we had a war on poverty and poverty won," von Bothmer told the Marin Independent Journal last week. "That is factually false. Poverty decreased from 20percent to 12.5percent in the '60s, during Johnson's Great Society. Poverty went down. But Reagan repeated that over and over and nobody called him on it."

The country is still divided today along the same lines drawn in the '60s, with conservatives seeing that time as the beginning of the erosion of family values, disrespect for the military and the start of a downward slide toward socialism, while the left sees it as the birth of the environmental movement, the rise of civil rights and the beginning of social programs that are still popular today. Both sides are looking at the same decade and both are honest about their beliefs, but each are seeing a completely different America that emerged from the 1960s, he said.

In one of his earliest speeches as a presidential candidate, Obama said it was time for the country to "get over the '60s." Von Bothmer's response: "Good luck, Senator. It's not going to happen. The '60s are still going on."

In between commutes to San Francisco and San Rafael to teach four classes, von Bothmer is making appearances to promote his book. He uses a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation to take audiences through his research and tell stories not included in the book, such as his experiences interviewing high-profile presidential advisers. He's also doing radio interview that air across the country, and has plans for appearances in New York and the Midwest between semesters.

Nothing is on the calendar yet for his old haunts in the Monterey area, but "I would love to come down if I was invited."

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