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PRESS RELEASE

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The Afterlife of an Era: How the 1960s Continue to Shape Presidential Politics

Depending on your age and your political inclinations, the 1960s represented either the apogee of American hope and promise, or the decade the country started its long ride to hell in a hand basket. The decade's power to divide a nation—culturally, politically, militarily—doesn't seem to have waned. Fifty years on, we're still acting and reacting to the schisms of the sixties. And in some cases, we're being manipulated by them, as Bernard von Bothmer details in his insightful new historical analysis—the first of its kind, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (University of Massachusetts, \$28.95, paper).

“Ever since Ronald Reagan, U.S. presidents, Democrats and Republicans alike, have battled over the collective memory of what the decade meant in an effort to advance their own agendas,” observes von Bothmer, who teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California. “We’ve seen the sixties examined from so many perspectives. I thought it would be interesting to see them through the lens of recent presidential politics.”

The “good sixties” vs. the “bad sixties” A look at how four presidents utilized a decade

Von Bothmer argues that, if the sixties never existed, conservatives would have needed to invent them. The culture wars unleashed by that turbulent decade

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have been good to the fortunes of right-leaning parties. The American Conservative movement, moribund to the point of extinction after Barry Goldwater and post-Watergate, was able to revive itself on its ability to define the sixties more convincingly than its rivals, von Bothmer contends.

Clinton wasn't averse to using the sixties when it suited his purposes, however, according to von Bothmer. Clinton and his supporters worked hard to identify themselves with what von Bothmer calls "the good sixties" (the idealism of John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps, the dreams of the Great Society, Martin Luther King, and the pre-1965 civil rights movement). The "bad sixties," however (protests, drugs, draft-dodging, and cultural permissiveness), have been a significantly more compelling political cudgel—wielded to considerable effect by both Bush presidencies and, most notably, by Ronald Reagan. "Reagan was a master of leveraging what he considered the perniciousness of the sixties for his own political ends. As governor of California, he was already running against 'the bad sixties' while the sixties were still happening. By 1984 his 'It's Morning in America' suggested that the sun was already setting on the excesses of decay and paralysis that were the legacy of the baby boomers."

A treasure chest of interviews

In *Framing the Sixties*, von Bothmer relies on a trove of primary sources in building his position that the sixties will continue to define us for at least another decade or so until the last of the baby-boom generation exits the stages of power. He also offers future historians a wealth of new primary sources—in the form of more than 120 interviews he conducted with cabinet members, speechwriters, advisors, strategists, historians, journalists, and activists from across the political spectrum. Notable interviews include: James A. Baker III, Edwin Meese III, Michael Dukakis, Bill Bradley, Robert Bork, Arthur Schlesinger,

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Noam Chomsky, Bob Woodward, Gary Hart, Richard Viguerie, Daniel Ellsberg, Julian Bond, Caspar Weinberger, Archibald Cox, Nicholas Katzenbach, Tom Hayden, and Phyllis Schlafly.

The book's scholarship has hardly escaped notice. Douglas Brinkley, author of *Tour of Duty: John Kerry and the Vietnam War* and professor of history, Rice University, calls *Framing the Sixties* a "truly important and essential study. Von Bothmer has done a marvelous job of setting the historical record straight. Instead of relying on staid orthodoxy, he analyzes the spin factor irresponsibly promulgated by both Right and Left."

Tom Brokaw, author of *The Greatest Generation* and *Boom! Talking About the Sixties*, says it's a "smart, important and impressively researched account of the decade that far too often is reduced to clichés by the Left and the Right. . . . invaluable to anyone eager to know the real story behind the political and cultural consequences of that tumultuous time."

Another scholar, Michael Kazin, co-author of *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* and professor of history at Georgetown University, writes, "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, Bernard von Bothmer's careful study is the place to start."

For further information, visit the author's website at www.framingthesixties.com

Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush

By Bernard von Bothmer

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About the Author

Bernard von Bothmer teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California. He was born and raised in New York City and received a BA with honors from Brown University, an MA from Stanford University, and a PhD in American history from Indiana University.

Questions for Interviewers

1. What led you to the sixties as an area of study?
2. Many of your interviewees promised you ten minutes, only to talk for more than an hour once you got going. To what do you attribute the continued passions for a decade that ended forty years ago?
3. In your book, you contend that the sixties were really fourteen years, 1960-1974. Were the sixties such a jam-packed decade that it needed a decade and a half to contain it?
4. Can the “good sixties” still win over the “bad sixties,” or is the battle over?
5. With all of the interviews you were able to obtain, was there anyone you regret not being able to secure?
6. Your book ends with Obama's election. How do we see the continued effects of the 1960s in his first year in office?
7. Would Kennedy be a Republican today?
8. Why are we still arguing about the Vietnam War, specifically, why does the Right still claim that we could have won?
9. When will we stop arguing about the 1960s?
10. How did you get all these people to talk to you on the record and tape recorded?
11. How has public memory of the 1960s been distorted?
12. In what ways has Lyndon Johnson been erased from history by the Democrats?
13. How did “the sixties” make Liberal a dirty word?