New Book Explores the Continued Use and Abuse of the 1960s by American Presidents

From Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, presidents have been using the decade of the sixties to their political advantage. In an insightful new book, Bernard von Bothmer writes about the importance of framings and makes a compelling case for why the 1960s won’t go away anytime soon.

San Francisco, CA (Vocus)October 26, 2010 -- It's election season, and throughout the land politicians of all stripes are framing the issues at hand. Who is to blame for our current economic woes, Obama, or Bush? What really happened these past few years? And how did a socialist hippie radical terrorist-coddling mosque-loving non-citizen foreigner ever get to be president, anyway?

Framing the past; that’s what politicians do. And no decade of American history has been argued over more than the 1960s. “If you look back on the sixties and, on balance, you think there was more good than harm in it, you’re probably a Democrat,” said Bill Clinton in 2004, “and if you think there was more harm than good, you’re probably a Republican.”

The issues raised by the 1960s remain the central dividing line in American politics, 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).

Framing the Sixties examines the battle over the collective memory of the decade primarily through the lens of presidential politics. Dr. von Bothmer, who teaches American history at the University of San Francisco and at Dominican University of California, shows how four presidents—Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush—each sought to advance his political agenda by consciously shaping public understanding of the meaning of “the Sixties.” He compares not only the way that each depicted the decade as a whole, but also their commentary on a set of specific topics: the presidency of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” initiatives, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War.

Those 1960s just won’t go away and die, will they? Whether it’s the controversy over Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal’s past statements regarding his service during the Vietnam War, or the debate whether Afghanistan (wait—wasn’t it Iraq?) is another Vietnam, or why Glenn Beck chose to hold his rally on the anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech, the 1960s remain the template for American politics.

Liberals today are on the defensive. The Tea Party has harnessed energy over the supposed expansion of Big Government. To their critics, the Tea Party is composed of racists and hate-mongers, harsh reminders of the 1960s. To their supporters, Obama is nothing more than a 21st- century L.B.J., “Lyndon Baines Obama,” as he has been called—in their eyes also a harsh reminder of the 1960s.

This, of course, is not a recent phenomenon. We’ve been arguing about the ‘60s ever since Ronald Reagan invented something called “the sixties” back in the 1960s themselves.

It is no secret that the upheavals of the 1960s opened fissures within American society that have continued to
affect the nation’s politics and to intensify its so-called culture wars. Yet it is remarkable to observe the extent to which political leaders, left and right, consciously exploited those divisions by framing the memory of that turbulent decade to serve their own partisan interests.

“Despite a forty-year remove, the tumult of the sixties and the subsequent backlash continues to drive our political discourse,” wrote Barack Obama in 2006 in The Audacity of Hope. When he announced his presidential run in January 2007, Obama expressed his desire to have America’s leaders move beyond the preoccupations of the baby boomers.

“My reaction when I read his speech?” said von Bothmer. “Good luck, Senator. It’s not going to happen. Eventually we will get over the 1960s, just as we got over the 1860s, the 1890s, and the 1930s. When every voice heard here has fallen silent, we will be doing talking about the 1960s—but only then.”

In Framing the Sixties, Bernard 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, 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, coauthor 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 more information, visit http://www.framingthesixties.com
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