The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan

The political left of the ’80s: reawakened campuses, alt culture, tech tactics. Despite the decade’s reputation as an era of conservatism, historian Bradford Martin of Bryant University says the political left thrived because of reinvigorated campus activism that initiated divestment, an alternative culture that promoted a shared identity, and new technologies like those embraced by ACT UP.

Smithfield, RI (Vocus/PRWEB) March 01, 2011 -- Overlooked by the 1980s narrative of a nation that had embraced the Reagan administration’s conservative momentum is the success of a political left that effected change on a number of fronts.

Activists thrived during the decade using a variety of means, says Bradford Martin, associate professor of history at Bryant University. In his new book, The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan, Martin offers one of the earliest scholarly examinations of the social and cultural issues of the era.

Among the findings Martin discusses in his book:

- New tactical innovations arose to supplement 1960s-style direct action. Broad coalitions often jelled around key issues, such as the nuclear freeze movement, then dissolved to reassert themselves elsewhere;
- Savvy use of technology helped reach a wide range of alternative media;
- The divestment movement reinvigorated student activism. Shantytowns built on campus greens shed light on American funding of the apartheid regime in South Africa;
- The decade’s popular culture reawakened social consciousness. “From Live Aid to Platoon, from Bruce Springsteen … to the Hollywood Women’s Political Committee’s efforts at electoral impact, the decade’s pop culture was not as bereft of left, liberal or progressive impulses as one might think,” Martin says;
- Group identity was a basis for mobilization. African American politicians “rejected the pervasive media stereotype of a passive underclass”; women gained increased visibility in politics and led efforts to institute anti-sexual harassment policies in the workplace; the radical disruptions of ACT UP “aimed to challenge individuals and institutions hostile or unresponsive to the health crisis in the gay community,” Martin says.

More information on Martin’s new book, released March 1 by Hill and Wang, can be found here: http://us.macmillan.com/theothereighties.

Martin is the author of The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Public Performance in Sixties America. He is a graduate of Boston University (Ph.D., 2000), University of Massachusetts-Boston (M.A, 1995) and Yale University (B.A. 1988).

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