

The Wrong Idea

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During my freshman year at Wisconsin's Whitewater State University I took two US History classes—one in the fall of '69, the second in the spring of '70—from a professor dapper as he was brainy. He always wore a suit and tie which was unusual on freeform college campuses of the era.

By contrast, my freshman English prof looked like beatnik Allen Ginsburg with long hair, a scraggly beard, and sweatshirt. He regularly bummed cigarettes from students during class and taught as poetry The Beatles' "A Day In The Life" and Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" among other Rock songs.

The history professor's lectures were carefully prepared and cleaved to the chapters he assigned. He was tough and demanding, giving regular quizzes in addition to comprehensive exams, but even harder on himself. We got our money's worth. He was never boring.

What I remember best is when we studied the US Civil War, he emphasized that it was fought over economic jealousies northern states felt toward the south *not* over slavery. Union manufacturers, he taught, didn't like Dixie states selling cotton and other raw materials to European nations, primarily England. Certainly this was a new way of looking at the conflict, *but* part of the college experience, for me at least, was learning things I had taken for granted were not true or only half true.

During my freshman year, I also attended teach-ins about the Vietnam War and had my eyes opened even though my brother, who had been stationed in Danang from 1966 to 1967, already had provided a clear picture of what was *really* going on in that distant, besieged land.

I kept the professor's view on the cause of the Civil War in mind and even repeated it to others over the years. However, when Pam and I visited Gettysburg in 2016, as a stop on our cross-country automobile trip to the Reason Rally in Washington D.C, I did additional reading about the battle and Civil War and came away convinced that we had not gotten the straight scoop from our sartorially splendid history prof. Why not?

This year I decided to look into his background thinking possibly he was a southern sympathizer who hailed from a former slave state and wanted to place the blame for the catastrophe on *greedy industrialists* not morally superior northerners who felt sorry for slaves.

Turns out he was from Michigan. And, ironically, given his view of the Civil War's primary cause, he went from Whitewater to the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, historically an African-American College, where he taught and worked as an administrator for 37 years until his death in 2010.

All I can think is he too was misled by a book, professor, or course of study. It happens to the best and worst of us. Maybe he came to a different opinion later in life. When I took his classes he was only in his late 20s.

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