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# Review of: Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948, by Barbara Dianne Savage

Kevin Allen Leonard

Western Washington University, [kevin.leonard@wwu.edu](mailto:kevin.leonard@wwu.edu)

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Review

Author(s): Kevin Allen Leonard

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***Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948.***

By Barbara Dianne Savage. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xiii, 391 pp. Acknowledgments, introduction, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

Most scholars have acknowledged the importance of the media—especially television—to the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. No one before Barbara Dianne Savage, however, had examined the role that radio played in the early years of the civil rights struggle. *Broadcasting Freedom* argues that the debates about race on the radio in the late 1930s and 1940s put in place the “ideological framing” for the later civil rights movement. Throughout the decade scrutinized by this book, African Americans tried to gain access to the national networks for programs about black history and the need for racial equality. Savage’s analysis of the content of the few programs produced by African Americans and their allies demonstrates that important changes occurred in U.S. racial ideologies in the 1940s. These changes laid the foundation for the successes of later civil rights activists.

Savage shows that the ability of African Americans to portray themselves and to call for an end to racial discrimination in national broadcasts was severely circumscribed in the years before World War II. The war offered advocates of racial equality increased access to the national radio audience. After race riots erupted in several U.S. cities in 1943, public affairs programs such as NBC’s *University of Chicago Round Table* and *Town Meeting of the Air* began to address the “Negro question” and “race tensions.” By 1945, however, the producers of both shows had decided that debates about race relations had become too volatile for broadcast; neither program devoted another show to the topic until 1947. By that time, the war had ended, and President Harry S. Truman had responded to the growing political power of African American voters in the North by appointing a Committee on Civil Rights. By the time *Round Table* aired a program endorsing the committee’s report, *To Secure These Rights* in late 1947, producers no longer felt compelled to include a white southerner in panel discussions of racial issues. When producers did include white southerners, other panelists often made them the targets of subtle ridicule. Although the panelists on public affairs programs increasingly supported racial equality, few African Americans were allowed to

represent themselves in these national broadcasts. With conservatives largely relegated to the margins of debates about race relations, opponents of segregation and other forms of blatant racial discrimination were increasingly able to define the terms of these debates.

To emphasize how restricted the national radio debate about race was throughout this period, Savage contrasts national broadcasts with two local programs, *New World A'Coming*, which began its run in 1944 on the independent New York station WMCA, and *Destination Freedom*, which aired between 1948 and 1950 in Chicago. Both programs reported incidents of discrimination and exhorted listeners to take action to eliminate injustice.

Savage's conclusions rest upon careful and thoughtful analysis of an impressive array of sources. To explain why African Americans struggled to gain access to radio and why early programs did not endorse direct action to end discrimination, Savage examined the statements of and correspondence between federal officials, African American intellectuals and community leaders, and network executives. She perused the transcripts of broadcasts in order to trace subtle changes in representations of African Americans and black history. Perhaps the most fascinating sources that Savage analyzed were the letters written by listeners responding to broadcasts. These letters reveal the wide range of racial ideologies embraced by different groups of Americans. Some of the letters also indicate that network officials' fears of arousing hostile reactions from European Americans were not unfounded. When black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier appeared on *Round Table* with sociologist Howard Odum and writer Carey McWilliams, for example, one listener from Tennessee wrote to object to the fact that "the colored participant addressed the other two participants by their last names without a 'Mr.'" (205)

*Broadcasting Freedom* is informed by theoretical writings about race and media, but it contains no obscure discussions of theory that would prevent readers unfamiliar with the theoretical literature from understanding the argument. It will captivate readers with an interest in race and World War II, the origins of the Civil Rights movement, or the history of radio, and it should be adopted by instructors who teach courses in the history of civil rights, African American history, and U.S. cultural history.

*Western Washington University*

KEVIN ALLEN LEONARD