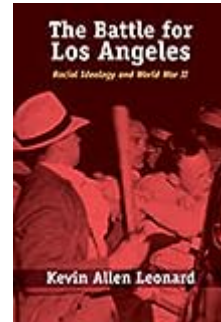




Kevin Allen Leonard. *The Battle for Los Angeles: Racial Ideology and World War II.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. xii + 360 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-4047-4.



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Making Race in Wartime Los Angeles

The Battle for Los Angeles traces the shifting meaning of race in Los Angeles from the eve of U.S. entry into World War II in 1941 through the city's first major election after the war in November of 1946. Drawing largely from the coverage of home front politics in Los Angeles-area newspapers, author Kevin Allen Leonard chronicles how and why race came to shape the city's public discourse about wartime identity, belonging, and citizenship. Leonard makes extensive use of mainstream, African American, Spanish-language, and English-language Japanese American publications to consider how the diverse populations of Los Angeles both participated in debates over race and helped construct its meaning. *The Battle for Los Angeles* narrates the on-going disagreement between those who believed that race determined national loyalty and behavior and those who advocated for the elimination of race discrimination through a deliberate non-recognition of race. Recognizing the growing, albeit uneven and contested influence of the latter, Leonard ultimately argues that "modernist racial ideology spread in wartime Los Angeles as a re-

sult of repeated verbal conflicts" (p. 16). Leonard's book is thus a nuanced and compelling analysis of the gradual emergence of "colorblind" ideology as the hegemonic racial discourse in wartime L.A.

Leonard's initial chapters investigate how 1941 served as the starting point in what would become a very public battle over the meaning of race in Los Angeles. Prior to that year, notes Leonard, race was rarely addressed explicitly in the press. Despite the efforts of some African American journalists to combat race discrimination in the city, especially those writing for the *California Eagle*, most Angelinos assumed racial difference and segregation to reflect the natural order of society. These assumptions were questioned in mid-1941, suggests Leonard, when the Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC) was instituted and FEPC hearings were held in Los Angeles. While the *Eagle* served as a primary venue for those who supported FEPC efforts to remedy race discrimination in war industry jobs, rebuttals in mainstream dailies like the *Times*, *Daily News*, and *Herald* by union leaders, employers, and journalists de-

nied the existence of discrimination and revealed the contours of an emerging debate about race in L.A.

Leonard underscores how the bombing of Pearl Harbor just a few months later in December of 1941 intensified racial discourse in Los Angeles. Pearl Harbor led to questions about whether the racial background of the city's Japanese and Japanese Americans made them inherently disloyal to the United States. Leonard shows that immediately following internment most city authorities and journalists answered this question with a resounding "yes." Despite there being few positive portrayals of Japanese Americans, however, by the beginning of 1942 some newspapers, especially the Japanese American *Rafu Shimpō*, raised doubts about whether race determined loyalty and questioned race as the basis for internment. In Leonard's analysis, then, white and Japanese Americans were the most vocal participants in the nascent battle over the meaning of race in Los Angeles.

In his middle chapters on 1942 and 1943, Leonard suggests that Mexican Americans were as central as Japanese Americans in the emergence of a "colorblind" modernist racial ideology in Los Angeles. When nineteen young Mexican American boys were arrested for the death of a single youth at a party near a remote swimming hole known as Sleepy Lagoon in mid-1942, newspapers in Los Angeles responded with months of headlines, propaganda, and attention to the controversial trial of the accused youth, what was considered to be a growing problem of youth crime and juvenile delinquency among Mexican Americans, and the related police round-ups and crack-downs on Mexican American gangs. The Sleepy Lagoon case enlivened debate in the press and among the public about whether race was a reliable factor in determining criminal, immoral, and dangerous behavior. Additional newspaper coverage of the War Relocation Authority's administration of the Japanese American internment camps, the U.S. military's enlistment of Japanese American soldiers, and, importantly, the riot and protest by Japanese American prisoners against conditions in the Manzanar internment camp in late 1942, further fueled public discussion about race. By the time white American servicemen and civilians beat, stripped, and humiliated young Mexican Americans wearing zoot suits in Los Angeles during the week-long Zoot Suit Riots in June of 1943, Leonard argues, most city officials and journalists responded by distancing themselves from statements citing race as the root cause of criminal and unpatriotic behavior. In ironic yet convincing fashion, Leonard shows how the racial violence of the Zoot Suit

Riots marked a critical turning point in L.A.'s shift towards "colorblindness" as the hegemonic mode of racial thinking and helped make overt racism in the press and city politics less acceptable.

In his concluding chapters on the end of World War II, however, Leonard is careful to point out that public debate about the meaning of race in Los Angeles and racism against non-whites was not over by any stretch of the imagination. On the one hand, Leonard maintains that supporters of the "fair play movement" advocating Japanese American equality, including many progressive activists and religious leaders, gained a foothold in the mainstream press. This mirrored a more general decrease in the number of public anti-Japanese voices in the L.A. press and federal government by the time exclusion orders were rescinded in late 1944, especially among military leaders who benefited from the dedicated service of many Japanese Americans. On the other hand, and at the same time, Leonard underscores the lingering specter of racism in Los Angeles, evidenced by restrictive covenants prohibiting African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish Americans from living in certain neighborhoods and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the city. Leonard further examines two critical ballot measures in 1946 as a referendum on modernist racial ideology. Proposition 11, which would have made amendments to the Alien Land Law, was rejected by voters and opposed by anti-racists who believed it would further strip property rights from many Japanese Americans and other non-whites. Proposition 15, which would have implemented fair employment legislation making it illegal to hire and fire people based on race, was supported by anti-racists, but was overwhelmingly defeated amidst claims that it would actually strip white workers of rights and undermine national security. Leonard thus ends his narrative by concluding that while the public and press increasingly argued that discrimination was wrong and a "colorblind" society desirable, many whites continued to disdain the idea of living and working alongside Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans.

The Battle for Los Angeles ultimately offers scholars interested in the history of race and ethnicity, Los Angeles, and World War II a rich analysis of how modernist racial ideology emerged, developed, and embodied debates over who and what was considered American. Leonard illumines nothing less than the complicated process by which the diverse communities of Los Angeles defined and made race, providing a grounded glimpse into the social construction of race in a con-

tested era and location. He reveals not just the competing views of racist and anti-racist thinkers, but the very terrain of debate itself to expose the possibilities and devastating limits of "colorblind" thinking about race in wartime L.A. Engaging the increasingly extensive literature on the history of Los Angeles, Leonard views L.A. as a multiracial city, one where conventional binaries of black-white race relations are of little use. Among the greatest strengths of the book, in fact, is its insistence that the shifting meaning of race in L.A. was routinely shaped by white, Japanese, Mexican, and African American voices. The focus on Japanese Americans and Mexican Americans as the central figures in debates over race, moreover, is a unique and important departure from the more common Asian-black or Latina/o-black frameworks of analysis and speaks to the uniqueness of Los Angeles during World War II. Leonard also contributes much to our understanding of the 1940s as a sea change moment in U.S. race relations. While conventional historiography highlights how participation of non-whites in the war effort served as an impetus for claims to equal citizenship and civil rights, Leonard more fully considers

how such claims were the product of complicated and contested debates over what whites and non-whites considered race to be. Leonard's explanation of how race was constructed during World War II thus sets the stage for how race was made and remade in debates over civil rights, citizenship, and belonging in the decades that followed.

In his focus on the discursive realm of race, Leonard is most interested in the vocabulary and metaphors available to Angelinos who framed the debate for the public at large. Consequently, Leonard prioritizes those journalists, politicians, and community leaders with access to the press as historical actors and leaves deeper analysis of the multiple layers of racial hegemony and everyday cultural, class, and gendered experiences, performances, and identities of race and ethnicity to other scholars. There is little question, however, especially when read in conversation with the burgeoning literature on the comparative and relational ethnic and cultural politics of 1930s-40s Los Angeles, that *The Battle for Los Angeles* is a welcome and important addition to race and ethnic, Los Angeles, World War II, and U.S. history.

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