Radio Daze: How conservative talk radio helped elect a president in its image

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

The day after the 1994 election, which gave Republicans control of the U.S. House of Representatives, Speaker-Elect Newt Gingrich called Rush Limbaugh. “You have helped us overcome the elite media bias,” he told America’s number one talk radio host. “Just by hammering home the truth about issues, you helped arm I think literally millions of people across the country with the facts.”

In the ensuing 25 years, according to Brian Rosenwald, co-editor-in-chief of “Made in History,” a daily feature of The Washington Post, talk radio broadcasts ran on more than 1,000 stations, became increasingly doctrinaire, “took over the Republican Party, and reshaped it in hosts’ and listeners’ image.”

In “Talk Radio’s America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party That Took Over America,” Mr. Rosenwald provides an informative account of talk radio and its impact on politics and policymaking. Talk radio, he indicates, was not created by — or for — the Republican Party. It originated “as a purely commercial enterprise,” driven by a need to entertain and engage “innocent of any overarching ideology or partisan leaning.”

Talk radio served increasingly as a Republican surrogate during the presidency of Bill Clinton. By the 2010s, “thirsting for a fight,” talk radio hosts endorsed hard-right policies and tactics, and blasted moderate, establishment Republicans. Talk radio, Mr. Rosenwald claims, did not only stump for Trump; “it created him,” providing a playbook for “the Donald’s” incendiary rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and “the pithy nicknames with which he branded his enemies.” Mr. Trump’s victory in 2016 “signaled that Americans now live in the world talk radio made.”

“Talk Radio’s America” includes many detailed accounts of hosts’ influencing debates about hot-button issues. He demonstrates, for example, that together with grassroots organizations such as Hold Their Feet to the Fire, they helped sink bipartisan legislative reform bills in 2006-2007.
Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., who liked to answer phones in his Washington office, listened in consternation to swearing, raging callers, and was “popped pretty good” when he appeared on an Atlanta-based talk radio station. Talk radio was “running America,” re-framing legislation as “amnesty,” Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., complained. In 2013, a compromise again seemed at hand until Mr. Limbaugh, Mark Levin, Laura Ingraham and Sean Hannity lowered the boom on wavering Republicans.

Mr. Rosenwald also tries to explain why liberal talk radio (like the Air America network) never got very far off the ground. Conservatives, he indicates, enjoyed first-mover advantages, locking down stations with powerful signals. Listening habits, moreover, differed in rural areas (where conservative listeners spent hours at a time on highways and did not have access to the Internet or cable TV) and cities. Liberal hosts and listeners, Mr. Rosenwald adds, less persuasively, did not share conservatives’ “thirst for in-your-face political radio.”

“Talk Radio’s America” is not without flaws. Few informed observers claim that talk radio took flight when conservative station executives conspired with Republican operatives to build a format based on Mr. Limbaugh’s program, and then turned it into “an appendage” of the GOP. More importantly, the zeal of hosts and their bosses to make money (by providing entertainment) does not lead to the conclusion that they discovered conservative political talk, “essentially by accident.” Or that Mr. Limbaugh “launched his show with no political goals.”

Indeed, Mr. Rosenwald emphasizes, repeatedly, that Mr. Limbaugh’s ideology and his style, which was “rooted in his decidedly conservative sensibilities,” were critical in capturing “the hearts and ears of alienated conservatives.”

Mr. Rosenwald is surely right, however, that the power of talk radio comes from their capacity to mobilize voters and demand that politicians adhere to the preferences of their base. And from the perception — greater, perhaps than the reality — that they can and do sway multitudes.

In the digital age, talk radio faces daunting challenges. Competition from social media has driven down ratings and advertising revenues. Although they don’t acknowledge that the cult-like allegiance to Mr. Trump has forced them, at times, to swallow hard and tow the party line, talk radio hosts can brag, Mr. Rosenwald writes, that they “put their avatar in the White House.”

That said, Mr. Rosenwald adds, their impact on American democracy (which includes a sacrifice of factual accuracy and the creation of echo chambers as well as enhancing political participation) “can only be rendered in shades of grey,” a tone not at all conducive to good talk radio.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.