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Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt had a unique marriage among twentieth century political couples. Their relationship was less about love for each other than about love for the American people. After weathering a devastating extramarital affair and a life-changing illness, this couple's passion for one another morphed into a distinctive partnership that characterized the rest of their lives together. No longer intimate, both Franklin and Eleanor exchanged a life of personal marital happiness for other fulfillments: political ambition and helping others. The Roosevelt Team had a political dynamic unlike any other. Separately, they had some success in achieving their different goals, but together they were almost invincible. They picked up each other's slack and drew together contradictory sectors of America, such as segregationist Southerners and working class blacks. Eleanor and Franklin played the political game well, building on one another's appeal and covering for the other's failures.

Eleanor took an unprecedented path as a political wife and First Lady, forging her own alliances separate from those of her husband and becoming highly active in many facets of political life. Her activism and independence marked her for both admiration and condemnation. Eleanor did many things which received naught but praise, such as sending individual gifts to needy children who requested them. As she was known for her thoughtfulness and kindness, she received volumes of mail. Much of the public found her easy to talk with: just a regular woman who used her position to benefit others.

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<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) to Lorina Hickock, 19 April 1936, as quoted in Cook, *Volume Two*, 349.

was too liberal and too progressive for her own good and her own time. She was labeled a socialist and a communist. To some, ER became a liability to her husband, costing him support through her pursuit of her own interests. Many felt she did what she wanted, regardless of what FDR preferred or needed.

An extensive analysis of Eleanor Roosevelt's correspondence about some of the issues most controversial in her husband's presidencies reveals the nuances of The Roosevelt Team and the unwritten ground rules for how and when the First Lady acted. Although she definitely cost FDR support at times, and often did not take the safe path, in the end her letters demonstrate that overall Eleanor Roosevelt was FDR's political asset.

### **Life Without Louis Howe**

The political dynamics of The Roosevelt Team were threatened in April of 1936 with the death of Louis McHenry Howe. For twenty-five years Howe had run FDR's campaigns, navigating his political career through the turbulence of an affair, the onset of polio, and a climb to the mountain top. Eleanor, who at first "deplored his gnome-like presence," visited him in the hospital every day she was in Washington for the almost nine months he was hospitalized.<sup>1</sup> Still unprepared for his death after a long sickness, Eleanor wrote to Lorena Hickock:

I think I felt Louis would always be an invalid but still always there...He was like a pitiful, querulous child but even when I complained I loved him and no one will ever be more loyal and devoted than he was.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Blanche Weisen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884-1933* (New York, Viking, 1992), 283; and Blanche Weisen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933-1938* (New York, Viking, 1999), 273.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) to Lorena Hickock, 19 April 1936, as quoted in Cook, *Volume Two*, 349.

Like many FDR associates of the day, Louis had been devoted to the President since the day they met. More importantly, however, Howe also harbored an unfailing loyalty to the First Lady.

Howe won Eleanor over during their long train rides during the 1920 Presidential campaign, as he assisted FDR in his run for the Vice-Presidency. In her autobiography, Eleanor remembered Howe as “break[ing] down my antagonism by knocking at my stateroom door and asking if he might discuss a speech with me...I was flattered.”<sup>3</sup>

From that campaign onward, a friendship and partnership grew stronger as they continued to work together on FDR’s behalf. Howe schooled her in politics and speechmaking—grooming her for the role she eventually took in shaping America.

Eleanor had an ally in Louis, who could help her to identify with her husband’s work.

Howe, in turn, had reinforcement in “holding Franklin down.”<sup>4</sup> Eleanor’s grandson, David Roosevelt, believed that Howe “help[ed] bridge whatever gaps existed between them [FDR and ER]...and provided her with a closer involvement in Franklin’s work.”<sup>5</sup>

After polio struck FDR, the political relationship between Eleanor and Howe became closer as they kept the Roosevelt name before the public eye. Eleanor felt useful and needed in a way she had not since the betrayal of her husband in the Lucy Mercer affair. Although she no longer had a romantic relationship with FDR, Howe tutored her on how she could be his indispensable political asset.

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<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 110.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship Based on Eleanor Roosevelt’s Private Papers* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 258.

<sup>5</sup> David B. Roosevelt, *Grandmere: A Personal History of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Warner Book, Inc., 2002), 116.

By the time of the 1936 election, Eleanor faced criticism for her conduct both in and out of the White House. She wanted to cultivate a positive public sentiment, working with Howe at solidifying FDR's chances for re-election. Early in the process, she forwarded a thorough memo to Howe with suggestions for political organization. It called for "a tightening up with greater effectiveness the National Democratic organization...a well constructed organization for educational work among women...[and] Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt be conferred with in this connection and her ideas as to organization and personnel be followed...."<sup>6</sup> Howe knew to solicit Eleanor's help with female members of the Democratic party, a faction he considered immensely important to the running of a campaign since "women [were] very much superior to men" in the "actual work among the voters."<sup>7</sup>

Howe and ER cooperated with Postmaster General James Farley to keep influential women active. In March of 1936, Farley appealed to Eleanor: "If you have any other suggestions...regarding the activities of women please call them to my attention."<sup>8</sup> He assured her that "I shall do everything within my power to help in the organization of women's Democratic groups."<sup>9</sup> Farley stepped in to help the Roosevelts deal with other potential political pitfalls as Howe neared his last days. In April, NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) executive secretary Walter White fired off a heated telegram to Eleanor regretting "apparent political trickery to keep anti-lynching bill from being brought up in House of Representatives."<sup>10</sup> Fearing

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<sup>6</sup> ER to Louis McHenry Howe, n.d., reel 15, in William H. Chafe and Susan Ware, eds., *The Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933-1945 (microfilm edition, 20 reels)*, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. Hereafter cited as *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, *Volume Two*, 352.

<sup>8</sup> James Farley (JF) to ER, 8 March 1936, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Walter White (WW) to ER, 5 April 1936, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

a damaging indictment of her husband by African-Americans, she forwarded the letter to Farley, commenting, "This seems a pretty serious thing and I do not know what is the proper thing to do."<sup>11</sup> Farley replied that he would "discuss this letter with the President and try to handle it in a satisfactory manner," adding "I should like very much to see you...to clear up some matters in my file upon which I should like to have a decision."<sup>12</sup> Earlier, Mary McLeod Bethune had asked Eleanor to speak at Bethune-Cookman College in Florida, a historically black college. Stephen Early, FDR's press secretary, had then told ER that Jim Hodges of the Florida Democratic Committee wanted the First Lady "NOT [to] visit the colored school in Florida with which Mrs. Bethune is associated."<sup>13</sup> In passing on the message from Farley, Early noted that Mr. Hodges believed that "such a visit would be 'most unfortunate'."<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Eleanor's behavior was under surveillance and she was on notice. That year, she decided not to give such a speech.

The administration received other criticisms of the First Lady, as all administrations are bound to do. Thinking her friend needed reassurance, Carrie Chapman Catt (women's rights activist and ally of ER) assured Eleanor that "I have always thought that the wife of a President, or any other high official, suffered more from attacks upon him and his policies than did the man himself...The President is used to these things..."<sup>15</sup> Eleanor, it seems, did not need anyone's sympathy. As she replied to Catt,

I am afraid you are really wasting sympathy on me, for, as a matter of fact, I think I am more hardened to criticism than the President is, and it makes very little dent upon me unless I think there is some real justification and something should be

<sup>11</sup> ER to JF, 9 April 1936, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>12</sup> JF to ER, 24 April 1936, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Early (SE) to ER, 20 March 1936, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Carrie Chapman Catt (CC) to ER, 17 April 1936, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

done. After all, you are either doing a helpful job or you are not.<sup>16</sup>

Tutored by the hard-nosed Howe, Eleanor now knew to expect a large amount of criticism, but to remain steadfast to her beliefs and goals.

Everything changed, however, with Louis Howe's demise on April 18, 1936. He had been the one person equally devoted to both Roosevelts, considering Eleanor essential to Franklin's success. With him gone, everyone separated into Franklin's camp and Eleanor's camp to some degree or another. Since Howe meant so much to Franklin, he carefully listened to his wife's views when Louis promoted them. Now, Eleanor had lost her biggest ally, as well as her protection against FDR's advisors who considered his wife meddlesome and problematic.<sup>17</sup> Bowing to their sentiments, Eleanor curtailed her activities as the campaign went into full swing in the summer. The Republican Party promoted Mrs. Alf Landon as a traditional First Lady, who would be taking care of her family until the election rather than traipsing around the country. In her daily newspaper column, *My Day*, ER avoided campaign and political issues. After immersing herself in Democratic committee work for years, Eleanor lightheartedly wrote that "Yesterday I visited the women's division in the National Democratic Headquarters, just for the fun of seeing someone else do the organizing and preparation for a campaign."<sup>18</sup> Missing out on the action, Eleanor hoped the public would notice and approve of her self-removal from the political scene.

A few weeks earlier, when another close friend Molly Dewson asked her to speak at a women's breakfast during the Democratic convention, Eleanor had declined out of

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<sup>16</sup> ER to CC, 18 April 1936, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, *Volume Two*, 253 & 263.

<sup>18</sup> *My Day*, 16 July 1936, in Rochelle Chadakoff, editor, *Eleanor Roosevelt's My Day: Her Acclaimed Columns, 1936-1945* (New York: Pharos Books, 1989), 22.

deference to her husband. She confided: "I would love to be at a breakfast in Philadelphia but am afraid I will only be able to come over for the day with Franklin. Otherwise, I might get myself into trouble!"<sup>19</sup> Forced into the shadows with Howe gone, Eleanor lost some clout within the administration. When Esther Lape (progressive activist and longtime friend of ER) solicited insider information that fall, ER regretted that "I cannot get you any more definite information, but these little political deals are not the things that they tell the ladies readily, as you know."<sup>20</sup> In some matters, it seems Eleanor just became 'another' disengaged lady on the political sidelines.

Left out of the "little political deals", Eleanor craved the big picture. Blending into the background did not work well for her, and she could not stand to see her husband's election fall apart if there was something she could do about it. So, in July, with her husband resting at Campobello, Eleanor noticed how unorganized the campaign had become in the absence of Louis Howe. She distributed a detailed memo to all the key people in the administration, including James Farley, Stephen Early, and Molly Dewson. The document sounded the alarm:

I hear from outside sources that the Landon headquarters are set up and ready to work full time...My feeling is that we have to get going and going quickly, as I stated yesterday. I sat down and analyzed things which I thought necessary to organization...I am putting them down again simply as a matter of record to get the answers back in black and white...

2. Who is responsible for studying the news reports and suggesting answers to charges, etc?...
  4. Who is in charge of research?...I gather if the President o.k.'s it, the aggressive campaign against Landon's record will begin before Landon's acceptance speech...
  7. In the doubtful and Republican states what special attention do you plan to give and have you collected any data as yet on these states?...
- More and more my reports indicate that this is a close election and that we need very excellent organization. That is why I am trying to clarify in my own mind

<sup>19</sup> ER to Molly Dewson (MD), 22 May 1936, in Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 442.

<sup>20</sup> ER to Esther Lape (EL), 21 September 1936, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

the functions of headquarters and have the President see a picture of the organization as clearly as possible in order that he may make any suggestions that he thinks necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Eleanor's warning contained two pages of specifics, particularly the need to establish who was in charge of what and how it would all get done. The demanding memo reflected her close work with Louis Howe in building FDR's successful political organization. She followed-up with a letter to her husband, insisting that "This thing has got to begin to move! I never realized more keenly what Louis' loss meant than I do now...we can not afford to be behind hand and lackadaisical."<sup>22</sup> Eleanor also found it difficult to remain quiet in public anymore, especially when others criticized her husband in unfounded attacks. A Roosevelt cousin, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, claimed that it was typical for President Roosevelt to mollycoddle America since he had adapted to his illness and therefore could not inspire the country to overcome the hardships of the depression.<sup>23</sup> Eleanor responded defensively in an October *My Day* column, saying of her husband, "No man who has brought himself back from what might have been an entire life of invalidism, to physical, mental, and spiritual strength and captivity can ever be accused of preaching or exemplifying a mollycoddle philosophy."<sup>24</sup> ER remained hardened to criticism against herself, but she always found attacks on her husband, especially regarding his disability, harder to take.

<sup>21</sup> ER, 16 July 1936, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>22</sup> ER to Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), 16 July 1936, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>23</sup> Cook, *Volume Two*, 285-86.

<sup>24</sup> *My Day*, 5 October 1936, in Chadakoff, ed., *My Day*, 34.

## ER and African-Americans

With Louis Howe gone and Eleanor's relationship with her husband turning more political and formal than warm and loving, Eleanor increasingly involved herself with the pressing issues of the time. Her empathy for the African-American cause grew gradually through her years in the White House. At first, she listened to the concerns of various African-American leaders and passed the gist on to the President, along with her own opinions on the matter. She also arranged meetings with FDR and occasionally acted on her own to promote civil rights. Without diminishing the importance of her earlier activities, it was ER's actions in the last half of her White House years that really drew the public's attention, and oftentimes, scrutiny and ire. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Eleanor's words and deeds conveyed to the world her sympathy with the plight of African-Americans and her desire to work towards true democracy and freedom in America.

Eleanor Roosevelt's views drew mixed reactions around the country. Many African-Americans applauded her actions and voted for her husband in the hopes that her influence would prove valuable to their progress. A few worried that even Eleanor did not do enough for their cause, and could not understand her reservations about fully dedicating herself to the issues. As First Lady, Eleanor felt she had to defer to her husband—at least some of the time—when he or his advisors thought it best for her not to attach her name to a certain matter. Despite this, Eleanor gained her husband a significant amount of the black vote. On the other hand, harsh criticism from powerful Southern whites, especially those who controlled Congress through the seniority system, forced Eleanor to limit her activities.

<sup>1</sup> WW to ER, 20 April 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1943*.

<sup>2</sup> ER to WW, 2 May 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1943*.

ER faced formidable opposition from the South, where her friendships with African-Americans and her efforts to convince her husband of the validity of black grievances were despised. In some instances, the President had to play both sides: listening to his wife with one ear while at the same time assuring Southern congressmen that he had no intentions to undermine segregation. In order to pass New Deal legislation and pull the country out of depression, FDR could not afford to alienate the men who held the fate of his legislation in their hands. Furthermore, the First Lady's behavior attracted special attention during elections, threatening the outcome of more than just legislation. Eleanor Roosevelt's liberal views on race both helped and hindered her husband's political career, as her personal correspondence, with blacks and whites alike, shows.

The first pressing issue concerning African-Americans that faced the Roosevelt administration was the Costigan-Wagner Anti-lynching bill created to make lynching illegal. In 1934, NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White drafted a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt about the current Congress, saying "We can well understand the President's desire for early adjournment of Congress. We can very much hope, however, that this will not take place until the Anti-Lynching Bill is voted on."<sup>25</sup> Eleanor replied with bad news, but arranged a meeting as well:

The President talked to me rather at length today about the lynching bill. As I do not think you will either like or agree with everything that he thinks, I would like an opportunity of telling you about it, and would also like you to talk to the President if you want to.<sup>26</sup>

So Eleanor invited White over for tea the following Sunday, and he had a long conversation with her and Sara Delano Roosevelt before the President arrived. FDR,

<sup>25</sup> WW to ER, 20 April 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>26</sup> ER to WW, 2 May 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

caught off-guard by White's specific rebuttals to each of his comments about lynching in constitutionality and filibusters, wondered aloud if his wife had primed his visitor.<sup>27</sup>

Although he supported the premise of the legislation, the President told White:

I did not choose the tools with which I must work...The Southerners by reason of the seniority rule...are chairmen or occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House committees. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill [needed] to keep America from collapsing.<sup>28</sup>

Despite FDR's dependence on Southern legislators, Walter White remained confident, writing to ER, "May I somewhat belatedly express my warm thanks to you for arranging the interview with the President...The charm and informality of the conversation...will long be remembered."<sup>29</sup> White felt hopeful that, if the bill came to a vote, it would pass in both houses.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the anti-lynching bill did not come up during that session of Congress, as Southerners did everything in their power to keep it from being introduced onto the senate floor.

Undeterred, Eleanor and Walter White continued their conversation about the bill, and her determination to help the NAACP grew. In November of 1934, ER informed White: "I talked with the President yesterday about your letter and he said that he hoped very much to get the Costigan-Wagner Bill passed in the coming session."<sup>31</sup> White clung to his optimism, writing ER about a man with an opposing viewpoint: "I have told this man that I do not believe this report for I know personally of the President's deep interest in lynching and of his desire to see the Costigan-Wagner bill passed, and especially do I

<sup>27</sup> Cook, *Volume Two*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> FDR as quoted in Cook, *Volume Two*, 181.

<sup>29</sup> WW to ER, 14 May 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> ER to WW, 23 November 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

know your own deep interest.”<sup>32</sup> Only when the President failed to mention lynching in his opening address to Congress in 1935 did White begin to lose hope. He wanted ER to “advise [him] if my optimism is well founded. It would help me during this very trying period to know that our efforts have not been in vain.”<sup>33</sup> Hoping to pacify the African-American community since her husband was doing little, Eleanor agreed to visit an art exhibit on lynching in New York after the first gallery forced an artist to remove his work when the subject was discovered. White asked Eleanor to come, since “Your attending the exhibit would be a most effective rebuke to those persons who forced poor Mr. Seligmann to cancel the exhibition.”<sup>34</sup> ER telegraphed that she would go “for a few minutes” but would “not make statements nor see reporters” and White could “say I have been there after I leave.”<sup>35</sup> Although she hoped to keep a low profile, Eleanor wanted to go and show her support. Upon second thought, however, she concluded that her attendance might upset the political balance:

The more I think about going to the exhibition, the more troubled I am, so this morning I went in to talk to my husband about it and asked him what they really planned to do about the bill...my husband said it was quite all right for me to go, but if some reporter took the occasion to describe some horrible picture, it would cause southern opposition. They plan to bring out the bill quietly as soon as possible...He thinks, however, they can get it through.<sup>36</sup>

Even though FDR did not forbid her outright, his subtle description of events convinced her to change her mind in order to protect the bill, an arrangement that often characterized their relationship. The President did not have to tell his wife what to do; he simply laid out the facts and trusted her to do the right thing for him and for the country.

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<sup>32</sup> WW to ER, 20 November 1934, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>33</sup> WW to ER, 10 January 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>34</sup> WW to ER, 12 February 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>35</sup> ER to WW, 20 February 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>36</sup> ER to WW, n.d., March 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

In this case, Eleanor decided the long-term gains of an anti-lynching bill should not be in any way jeopardized for the short-term strengthening of African-American morale. She informed White:

I do not want to do anything which will harm the ultimate objective even though we might think for the moment that it was helpful and even though you may feel that it would make some of your race feel more kindly toward us. Therefore, I really think that it would be safer if I came without any publicity or did not come at all.<sup>37</sup>

Eleanor wanted to be safe rather than sorry, still believing the bill would get passed.

As White continued to push for action on the lynching bill, ER tried her best to advance his cause. Soon, in very understated terms, members of the administration nudged her to back away from the issue. Southern Senators were prepared to filibuster for months to block the bill, and White and ER expected the President to say something to call off the filibuster. After Eleanor tried to arrange another meeting between White and the President, her secretary received the word from FDR's secretary explaining why a meeting would not be possible:

I did not make an appointment for Mr. White for two reasons: The first was, that the President's appointments are so heavy that it is impossible; The second reason was, that the President is not discussing with anyone messages that are under consideration in a Committee. Confidentially, also, this is a very delicate situation and it does not seem advisable to draw the President into any more than we have to.<sup>38</sup>

FDR's appointment secretary, Marvin McIntyre, captured the mood of the President's inner circle in regards to both White and the bill. Eleanor got herself a gentle scolding and a request not to press the issue. With no aid from Roosevelt, Senator Costigan gave in and withdrew the anti-lynching bill in early May so the Senate could act on other

<sup>37</sup>ER to WW, n.d., March 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>38</sup>Marvin McIntyre to Malvina Schneider Thompson (MT), 14 March 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

important bills. Angry about FDR's inaction, White immediately severed connections with the administration. To the President he announced "[his] belief that the utterly shameless filibuster could not have withstood the pressure of public opinion had you spoken out against it...I feel, therefore, that in justice to the cause I serve I cannot continue to remain even a small part of your official family."<sup>39</sup> Understanding his resentment, Eleanor penned a quick sympathy note to White, showing she still held out hope: "I am so sorry about the bill. Of course, all of us are going on fighting and the only thing we can do is to hope that we will have better luck next time."<sup>40</sup> Afterwards, though, ER had to be careful as to how much encouragement she gave to White.

On May twenty-first, White and his assistant secretary Roy Wilkins invited Eleanor Roosevelt to be the speaker at the Annual NAACP Conference in June. Mrs. Roosevelt declined the invitation, after her secretary heard from FDR's office that "The President does not think Mrs. Roosevelt should go...."<sup>41</sup> Vetoed, Eleanor still sent her support in the form of a message to be read at the conference:

It was with deep regret that I was obliged to refuse to attend the conference on June 25<sup>th</sup>....I realize that this is a time when many things of great interest to the colored people of the country will be discussed.

I am deeply interested in these problems and am sorry that I cannot take part in the discussion. I hope that ways can be found to accomplish some of the things which you and I both desire...<sup>42</sup>

Possibly she went too far in encouraging White's efforts, for she received a "Personal and Confidential" memorandum from FDR's press secretary, "warning" of his perseverance:

The memorandum is sent at this time because Walter White has been bombarding the President with telegrams and letters demanding passage of the

<sup>39</sup> WW to FDR, 6 May 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>40</sup> ER to WW, 8 May 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>41</sup> GGT to MT, 28 May 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>42</sup> ER to WW, 15 June 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill before the adjournment of Congress; complaining about the War Department's policy regarding the assignment of negro reserve officers in C.C.C. camps etc.

Walter White for some time has been writing and telegraphing the President. Frankly, some of his messages to the President have been decidedly insulting....

...Mr. Forster advises that Walter White, before President Roosevelt came to the White House, because of his activities, has been one of the worst and most continuous troublemakers."<sup>43</sup>

Undeterred by Early's unflattering comments, ER fired back that "If I were colored, I think I should have about the same obsession that he [White] has...."<sup>44</sup> Eleanor realized that if anything were to be done about racial injustice, she would have to fight it herself, for FDR's advisors knew the price of the President getting too close to African-American leaders.

To ER, Franklin's advisors worried too much about her actions. She knew that:

Many of my racial beliefs and activities in the field of social work caused Steve Early and Marvin McIntyre grave concern. They were afraid that I would hurt my husband politically and socially, and I imagine they thought I was doing many things without Franklin's knowledge and agreement.<sup>45</sup>

Trying to protect the President, members of his administration never realized that Eleanor did much of her work with FDR's implicit—if not explicit—permission. While he had to diminish his support for blacks in lieu of his own Southern Strategy, his wife showed African-Americans that the White House *did* care. The President did not limit his wife's work on racial issues. He knew how to play the game, reassuring her that: "You can say anything you want. I can always say, 'Well, that is my wife; I can't do anything about her'."<sup>46</sup> Eleanor represented a more idealistic side of the White House, a political benefit

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Early (SE) to MT, 5 August 1935, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*

<sup>44</sup> ER to SE, 8 August 1935, in Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 519.

<sup>45</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 164.

<sup>46</sup> FDR as quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 164.

for FDR that widened his appeal. Gallup poll surveys in October of 1936 illustrated this double appeal. A survey of blacks showed that sixty-nine percent of blacks overall preferred Roosevelt for President in the upcoming election, while at the same time a poll by region showed the South as the most supportive region for Roosevelt at sixty-eight percent.<sup>47</sup> If FDR could continue to court racist southern politicians while ER expanded African-American support, they had the best of both worlds. Such a balancing act was very precarious, however.

Fearing the scales would be tipped for the 1936 election, FDR's advisors scaled back ER's activism during that year, a purpose in which she mostly acquiesced. In February, Eleanor advised Walter White that she "should only make one speech to a Negro audience this spring."<sup>48</sup> Knowing this, he told her that "both for the Administration's sake and ours I really do not believe you could choose a better occasion for that single speech than at the closing mass meeting of our [the NAACP's] Twenty-Seventh Annual Conference..."<sup>49</sup> Conscious of the political battle between the Roosevelts, he added, "As you know, the Association is strictly non-partisan. There will be no speeches permitted by party spokesman. But you would be above party affiliation and your presence there would do an infinite amount of good."<sup>50</sup> White made every effort to get the First Lady to speak to the NAACP, but to no avail. She declined for personal reasons: she needed to be at Campobello at the time of the Conference to prepare the summer house for her husband and sons.<sup>51</sup> She apologized to White: "I am

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<sup>47</sup> Gallup Polls on 11 October 1936 and 4 October 1936, in George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion, 1935-1971: Volume One, 1935-1948* (New York: Random House, 1972), 36.

<sup>48</sup> WW to ER, 4 February 1936, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> ER to WW, 19 February 1936, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

more than sorry, but, all things considered, it may help you more by my not being too much in evidence during the next few months.”<sup>52</sup> Whether her reason was merely an excuse or not, Eleanor worried that her public activism was upsetting the balance. If her husband lost re-election because of her African-American ties, she realized the black race would be the real losers.

In 1936 FDR won in a landslide. As the election loomed and then passed, lynching still remained the key topic for the NAACP. ER wanted anti-lynching legislation passed, but she could not convince her husband to speak out. The President lectured his wife that lynching should be dealt with by the states, and that it might be unconstitutional for the federal government to step in. Still troubled, Eleanor spoke with FDR and wrote White:

I will talk to him again about the Van Nuys resolution [lynching legislation] and will try to talk also to Senator Byrnes and get his point of view. I am deeply troubled about the whole situation as it seems to be a terrible thing to stand by and let it continue and feel that one cannot speak out as to his feelings. I think your next step would be to talk to the more prominent members of the Senate.<sup>53</sup>

Her husband nonetheless kept his silence. Lynching remained untouched by federal law as the legislation slipped through Congress, again without even a vote. In December of 1938, the NAACP contacted the President about current race issues. Even though Southern senators filibustered the anti-lynching bill because they vowed the states would take care of it, “absolutely no steps have been taken to make good on those assertions.”<sup>54</sup> The NAACP told FDR, “It is our conviction that a strong word is needed from you as the leader of the nation to the effect that while we rightly condemn racial persecution abroad

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> ER to WW, 19 March 1936, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>54</sup> WW to FDR, 23 December 1938, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

we as Americans should at the same time clean up our own domain.”<sup>55</sup> To support their position they included a press release about Germans discounting the American President’s pronouncements about Germany’s persecution of minorities in light of the “unpunished and unrebuked lynchings in America.”<sup>56</sup> When White sent a copy of his letter to the First Lady, she responded about all of the association’s concerns, especially the parallel drawn between racial discrimination in Europe and in the United States:

Of course, what you say in your last two paragraphs was said in this country and has been said again and again. There is a difference, which the south will of course point out, but I think there is enough similarity to make quite a good argument along these lines.<sup>57</sup>

In agreeing that racial persecution in the American South was in some way analogous to the Jewish atrocities in Europe, Eleanor readied herself for controversial stands on race. Her upcoming comments might harm the President’s popularity, but the issue was becoming too important for her to side-step and soft-pedal any longer.

A delicate problem faced Eleanor in 1939, when the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) banned an African-American singer from performing at their Constitution Hall. Exceptionally popular, Marian Anderson’s concert was expected to draw a large crowd which only the D.A.R.’s auditorium could hold. As a member of that organization, ER did not know if she could support its white-only policy in Constitution Hall by continuing her affiliation. She pondered the question, and in a February edition of *My Day* she rendered her judgment:

The question is, if you belong to an organization and disapprove of an action which is typical of a policy, should you resign or is it better to work for a changed point of view within the organization. In the past...I have usually stayed until I had at least made a fight and had been defeated.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> ER to WW, 3 January 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Even then, I have, as a rule, accepted my defeat and decided I was wrong or, perhaps, a little too far ahead of the thinking of a majority at that time....But in this case I belong to an organization in which I can do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.<sup>58</sup>

The following day, a jubilant Walter White telegraphed from the NAACP “our warm thanks and congratulations on resignation from D.A.R.”<sup>59</sup> The First Lady’s decision received a great amount of press coverage, both positive and negative. Concerning the overall population, Gallup Polls proved that the incident did not lessen Eleanor’s popularity. When a January 1939 survey asked “*Do you approve of the way Mrs. Roosevelt has conducted herself as ‘First Lady’ ?*” sixty-seven percent answered “*Yes.*”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, when a March survey asked if the population approved of Mrs. Roosevelt’s resignation from D.A.R., sixty-seven percent said yes.<sup>61</sup> With the latter survey also broken down by region, Eleanor’s action tellingly received a majority approval in every area of the country *except* the South.<sup>62</sup> In the midst of all the public attention and still without a concert hall, White and Anderson’s manager came up with the idea of an open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial. They brought the plan to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, who liked it enough to ask the President for approval, which he obtained. An Easter Sunday concert was arranged, with seventy-five thousand people attending.

Eleanor was out of town the day of the concert and unable to attend. Whether that was coincidence or purposeful planning is unclear. A triumphant White praised ER after the concert: “Thanks in large measure to you the Marian Anderson concert on Sunday was one of the most thrilling experiences of our time. Only one thing marred it—that

<sup>58</sup> *My Day*, 27 February 1939, in Chadakoff, ed., *My Day*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> WW to ER, 28 February 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>60</sup> Gallup Poll on 9 January 1939 in Gallup, 135.

<sup>61</sup> Gallup Poll on 20 March 1939 in Gallup, 142.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

you couldn't be there. But I understand thoroughly the reason you could not be there."<sup>63</sup>

Others in FDR's administration, however, felt compelled to attend and knew of the First Lady's part in the arrangements. After the concert, Secretary of the Advisory Committee on Fine Arts Edward Bruce wrote ER:

I am sure that you realize what a beautiful thing you have done for the colored people in connection with the Marian Anderson incident....  
...I am sure you have been made aware of the spiritual uplift you have given the colored people and I think many of them feel you have opened up a new world for them and a new freedom.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, a group of African-Americans prepared to picket a D.A.R. meeting in protest following Marian Anderson's concert. Again, Eleanor recognized that a backlash might result if they took their objections to the extreme. Worried, she hastily penned a note to White that she had heard of this group's intentions and asked the NAACP leader to step in and stop the demonstration:

I do not know if there is anything you could do to prevent this but it worries me very much to have anything of this kind done. In the first place, Washington is a city where one could have serious trouble and I think it would not do any good to picket the D.A.R. It would only create bad feeling all the way around. At present the D.A.R. Society is condemned for the stand it took and if picketing is done it may result in the sympathy swinging to the other side. I would strongly urge you to use your influence against this and to leave well enough alone.<sup>65</sup>

White "agree[d] wholeheartedly" with the First Lady's opinion and blocked the picketing.<sup>66</sup> Since the public was aware of the black community's distaste with D.A.R.'s position, activists did not need to overwhelm a group of "pathetic old ladies."<sup>67</sup>

With the D.A.R issue out of the way, Eleanor accepted an offer to honor Marian Anderson. She "consent[ed] to present the Spingarn Medal to Miss Anderson," an award

<sup>63</sup> WW to ER, 12 April 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>64</sup> Edward Bruce to ER, 2 May 1939, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>65</sup> ER to WW, 12 April 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>66</sup> WW to ER, 14 April 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>67</sup> WW to C?, 11 April 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

that honored the talented singer in her own right, rather than as a tribute to trumping an all-white segregationist organization.<sup>68</sup> White made arrangements to broadcast nationwide ER's speech and presentation, because so many stations were "naturally very anxious to get in your address and Miss Anderson's response."<sup>69</sup> The First Lady's resignation from the D.A.R. implicitly made her views known to the public, but her nationwide presentation to an acclaimed African-American singer conveyed to the country her explicit position on race. By 1939, Eleanor willingly showcased her opinions on racial equality through undeniably supportive acts. Rather than quietly helping black leaders behind the scenes, she spoke and acted in favor of her values in full public view. As further proof, in July of that year, Walter White sent her a card of membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which she felt "glad to accept...."<sup>70</sup>

As 1940 and another election year approached, however, Eleanor was careful not to make so any big and bold statements that she drove important supporters away from FDR. When a friend queried Walter White how she might get Mrs. Roosevelt to speak to her City-Wide Forum in Baltimore, he replied: "Confidentially, I happen to know that there are a number of her close friends, who are equally as friendly to us, who feel that we should not call on her too often."<sup>71</sup> The First Lady could only be used occasionally to lend luster to national and local groups. Attaching her name to too many small organizations might undercut her purposes. Invited to sponsor a local black group, she reminded White, "I do not think it would be wise for me to give my name as a sponsor to

<sup>68</sup> WW to ER, 12 April 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>69</sup> WW to ER, 20 June 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>70</sup> ER to WW, 14 July 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>71</sup> WW to Katrine N. White, 16 August 1939, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

the report you sent me....”<sup>72</sup> This followed a directive from the President to his wife that “You *should not accept* a place as a member of this group....”<sup>73</sup> ER need not have worried that her declination of speaking invitations would be viewed as a desertion of the cause of racial justice. Crystal Bird Fauset, a leader in the Democratic National Committee, reminded ER’s friend Elinor Morgenthau that:

No Negro in the country doubts the sympathetic and generous attitude of Mrs. Roosevelt toward the colored group as a whole, and during this campaign nothing should be done to emphasize the difference between her attitude in Washington, and that of large groups of Democrats in other parts of the country.<sup>74</sup>

Fauset’s letter illustrates an interesting twist: the First Lady’s activism was reflecting on the Democratic Party as a whole. Highlighting her work too much prior to the election would show that she went above and beyond the rank-and-file Democrats, and pinpoint her as a glaring exception to the rule.

Still pertinent as well were the feelings of racist Southerners who abhorred the First Lady’s challenge to their segregationist beliefs. Perhaps she should not have worried so much—vocal Southerners were not necessarily a majority of the mainstream. Their voices only stood out since many held high governmental positions. Frank P. Graham, UNC-Chapel Hill President and an advocate of social justice, tried to quell ER’s misgivings about accepting a speaking invitation to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare that year. He wrote her:

You can be rest assured that the Southern people want you....

You need have no misgivings about the reaction in the Southern states.

There was a time after the last conference when some good people resigned because the conference, through misunderstanding, was smeared as being both red and black....

<sup>72</sup> ER to WW, 3 January 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>73</sup> Emphasis mine, FDR to ER, 2 January 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>74</sup> Crystal Bird Fauset to Elinor Morgenthau, 19 October 1940, reel 9, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

...We are glad that this has cleared up in advance so that there can be no last minute understanding about members of the two races sitting in this inter-racial conference without discrimination...

The ground is cleared for a useful conference to which you will make a most vital and humane contribution in your own inimitable way, which has won the admiration and affection of many millions of our Southern people along with scores of millions of the people of our nation.<sup>75</sup>

Graham assured ER that the white South was not united against her. He promised a warm and open climate for the expression of her beliefs amongst like-minded Southerners, of which there were many.

The major race issue from 1940 through the rest of FDR's tenure was the treatment of blacks in the military. Segregation in the armed forces during the forties contradicted the freedom for which the United States fought abroad during World War II. Eleanor took part in much of this debate, especially a controversy that boiled over after a small White House conference in September, 1940. The meeting resulted from ER's efforts after Walter White promoted the view that "Negroes object to being the one group so segregated not only because of the principle involved but because such separation makes easier discrimination by hostile or prejudiced superiors."<sup>76</sup> On September twenty-seventh, Walter White, A. Phillip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and T. Arnold Hill, of the National Youth Administration, met with the President, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Assistant Secretary of War. Little beneficial change followed, other than Roosevelt's unfulfilled promise that "negroes would be integrated into all branches of the army, combat as well as service units, at the rate of 9.5%."<sup>77</sup> However, White emphasized the importance of the opportunity for frank discussion about discrimination in the armed services. The White House quoted him as

<sup>75</sup> Frank Graham to ER, 21 March 1940, reel 10, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>76</sup> WW to ER, 17 September 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>77</sup> White House Press Release, 9 October 1940, in reel 19, *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

saying, "While very little was definitely promised so far as action against these barriers is concerned, we believe definite progress was made."<sup>78</sup>

Problems immediately ensued, particularly involving the press release itself, both its wording and its timing. Hoping to release a statement soon after the meeting, White contacted the White House before doing so because "we did not want to violate the unwritten rule about revealing what had taken place in the conference with the President until the White House had given us the authority to do so."<sup>79</sup> He enlisted the help of the First Lady because he "was in a most difficult position in not getting a reply from the White House to our telephone calls and telegram."<sup>80</sup> Once ER looked into it and the administration released a summary of the meeting, a storm broke about the wording. Rather than stating that African-American leaders pressed for drastic change while very little was approved, the press release implied something entirely different. White challenged press secretary Early:

Your statement... "as a result of that conference", conveys to every reasonable person the explicit and unmistakable impression that Messrs. Randolph, Hill and I approved segregation and discrimination during the September 27<sup>th</sup> conference at the White House instead of resolutely opposing it.<sup>81</sup>

Since the official release implied that the NAACP accepted segregation, local groups began attacking the NAACP national office and its leadership for their apparent betrayal. One division derided Walter White's unfailing support for Roosevelt, claiming that: "Walter and NAACP are compromising by assenting to Jim Crow in the U.S. Army and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> WW to ER, 4 October 1940, in reel 19, *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> WW to SE, 21 October 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Navy by Pres. Roosevelt just because he is for Roosevelt.”<sup>82</sup> A friend then shared with Eleanor her dismay over the incident:

I was frankly amazed at Walter White, to learn that he was connected with the approval of this measure [segregation] and I called him up to find that the releases from the White House were incorrect.

I was present at the dinner at which you spoke, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and know how deeply you feel about helping with the Negro problem. Certainly this error which strikes at the heart of progress for all people must be corrected.<sup>83</sup>

Eleanor quickly responded that the conference did have its successes. Early felt he had been misinterpreted and tried to clear up any misunderstanding. ER reasoned that “The important thing is to clear these three fine leaders from the accusation of having countenanced segregation in their conversation....The White House...is not anxious to make life any harder for this group of young people.”<sup>84</sup> After much back-and-forth and skepticism on both sides, the White House finally admitted to its mistake. Early sent White an apology:

If the words I used have been interpreted by any newspaper writer in a way that embarrasses you or your associates, I am deeply regretful....

As evidence of the fact that this is written to you in the best of faith, I want you to know that I have told the newspapermen to whom I spoke on October ninth how my statement to them has been misinterpreted by a part of the press. They have also been acquainted with the contents of this letter to you.<sup>85</sup>

The President sent a copy of the letter to ER, attaching a notation that simply read: “For Your Information.” It signaled his desire that she know that all had been taken care of. White wrote ER to say, “May I take this means of thanking you once again for your

<sup>82</sup> Pearl Mitchell to WW, 11 October 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>83</sup> Viola Ilma (VI) to ER, 23 October 1940, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>84</sup> ER to VI, 28 October 1940, reel 11, in *Papers of ER*.

<sup>85</sup> SE to WW, 25 October 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

invaluable aid in straightening out certain difficulties.”<sup>86</sup> Everyone benefited from the quick handling of the matter, especially since November marked another election.

Discrimination and segregation in the armed forces remained a focal point for blacks, especially as America prepared itself for its inevitable entrance into war. In 1941, the NAACP worked towards introducing a Senate resolution for the investigation of the status and treatment of the Negro in the national defense program.<sup>87</sup> To overcome certain Southern Senators’ misgivings, the NAACP wanted “to invite to testify at those preliminary hearings one or two outstanding persons whose testimony will focus public attention upon the problem.”<sup>88</sup> In a plea to Eleanor, White slyly added, “You have probably guessed by now that the one person whose testimony would do the most in this situation would be your own.”<sup>89</sup> ER’s secretary replied that “she will be glad to attend the hearings...but she does not know how much she will be able to contribute.”<sup>90</sup> By then, Eleanor felt comfortable taking an active role in pushing for racial progress. White knew ER was just being modest and that she could help in numerous ways. He asked her to speak of “the efforts which she has made in numerous instances to break down discrimination against Negroes...in the defense program” and that “in sheer self interest the United States must change its pattern of discrimination while it is fighting for democracy.”<sup>91</sup> That ER was willing to speak on behalf of blacks in front of Congress showed a development in her willingness to defend her beliefs no matter what the repercussions.

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<sup>86</sup> WW to ER, 2 November 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>87</sup> WW to ER, 31 January 1941, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> MT to WW, 7 February 1941, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>91</sup> WW to MT, 10 February 1941, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

In June of the same year, A. Phillip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized a protest march because “Negroes are the victims of discrimination in National Defense....To fight this un-American and un-Democratic practice, Negro leaders have formed a movement to mobilize 100,000 Negroes to March on Washington for jobs and justice in National Defense.”<sup>92</sup> Eleanor understood his anger, but worried that the march would do more harm than good. She asked Randolph to rethink his “March on Washington”:

I have talked over your letter with the President and he feels very strongly that your group is making a very grave mistake at the present time to allow this march to take place.

I am afraid it will set back the progress which is being made in the Army at least towards better opportunities and less segregation...

...You know that I am deeply concerned about the rights of Negro people, but I think one must face situations as they are and not just as one wishes them to be. I think this is a very serious decision for you to take.<sup>93</sup>

Eleanor’s concern stemmed from both her own beliefs as well as her husband’s. She agreed with FDR’s logic, that such militancy might turn Congress away from concessions they were willing to make. Even though she did not always like how things worked, ER understood the way politics operated. As difficult as it might be for someone wanting immediate change, slow and well thought-out planning got the job done more effectively. To persuade Randolph to cancel his plan, the President had his wife send a copy of her reply to Assistant Secretary of War Robert Patterson. Patterson responded with a three page memo of how his department was working to avoid the march. He explained to ER all the various methods the War Department had begun implementing to “afford Negroes equal opportunities in our defense industry.”<sup>94</sup> Patterson’s diligence in working towards

<sup>92</sup> A. Phillip Randolph (APR) to ER, 5 June 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>93</sup> ER to APR, 10 June 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Patterson to ER, 13 June 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

racial equality in his department paid off when Randolph postponed the march. ER felt both “glad” about its postponement and “delighted that the President is issuing an executive order on defense industries.”<sup>95</sup> Possible disaster had been averted and political compromise achieved, all through her careful maneuvering of negotiators.

Several other issues emerged during the war years, in which Eleanor served as go-between for her husband and her African-American friends. On the recommendation of Mary McLeod Bethune, ER composed a memo to her husband: “I have been asked to call your attention to the importance of having a Negro in a position who can actually confer with the President occasionally on problems that are pertinent to Negroes.”<sup>96</sup> FDR scribbled his opposition: “No—Explain to Bethune better to have a white person...”<sup>97</sup> Eleanor then passed on the rejection, writing Mrs. Bethune that “he [FDR] says he feels it unwise to appoint people definitely as of any race or creed. I think, therefore, it is better to have a white person who is sympathetic.”<sup>98</sup> ER softened her husband’s words and tone and passed off his views as hers as well. Whether she agreed or not, people accepted disagreeable information better when it came from ER, because they knew she was less inclined to let politics prevail. The First Lady often communicated with her husband in this manner: quick memos about what she felt should be brought to his attention. While her advocacy often made an impact, it is interesting that the Roosevelts corresponded through memos and secretaries. Their relationship focused on getting things done for others rather than for each other.

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<sup>95</sup> ER to APR, 26 June 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>96</sup> ER to FDR, 22 November 1941, reel 2, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>97</sup> FDR to ER, 22 November 1941, reel 2, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>98</sup> ER to Mary Bethune (MB), 27 November 1941, reel 2, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

The racial climate turned violent in 1943, when conflict over discrimination sparked a race riot in Detroit. One target of attack following the riot turned out to be none other than the President's wife. Had her quest for racial equality really caused a riot? Most likely her activities had no direct relation to the violence, but angry Southerners needed no evidence to assail the First Lady. ER's friend, a North Carolina newspaper editor, editorialized about the lack of Southern chivalry in the assaults on the First Lady:

It is to be regretted that in a thoughtless moment the editor of a Mississippi paper so far forgot the atmosphere of the South and the chivalric attitude toward women as recently to charge the responsibility of for the death of men killed in the Detroit race riot is on the hands of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, saying: "Blood on your hands, Mrs. Roosevelt! And the damned spots won't wash out either."

No Southerner can read that without a blush of shame and mortification and humiliation.<sup>99</sup>

Eleanor thanked him for his support, observing that "I suppose when one is being forced to realize that an unwelcome change is coming, one must blame it on someone or something."<sup>100</sup> ER managed to take it all in stride. She also received the unwavering backing of her ally, Walter White, who wrote:

I want you to know that many millions of Americans, both white and Negro, are grateful to you and bitterly resentful of the vicious attacks being made upon you because you have courageously taken the position that democracy should be practiced as well as preached in the United States. We know it is superfluous to tell you this, but I want to anyway – that the measure of the character of those who attack you is best gauged by their attempts to blame you for what took place in Detroit. That is always the way of the coward and the poltroon. Do not let it dishearten or disturb you, as I am sure it will not.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Josephus Daniels, *The News and Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., n.d., July 1943, reel 5, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>100</sup> ER to Josephus Daniels, 23 July 1943, reel 5, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>101</sup> WW to ER, 6 July 1943, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

In a modest reply, ER said, "I am glad if I have been helpful and only wish there were more I could do. The attacks made upon me do not bother me in the least."<sup>102</sup> Over years of criticism for her involvement in politically and socially controversial issues, ER developed a hard outer shell. Only when her actions spelled definite doom for FDR's policies did she back away.

Eleanor's work with African-Americans grew from a somewhat passive, behind-the-scenes support to a public activism for racial justice. Oftentimes, her work angered and alienated important Southern segregationists. Possibly, she lost her husband some votes and made it more difficult for him to pass the legislation he felt most essential. In the end, however, her work for racial equality probably helped FDR more than it hurt him. Concerning these issues, they kept the political scale balanced very well. An excerpt from a letter to Walter White from NAACP National Board member Pearl Mitchell accurately captured the manner in which Eleanor aided the Roosevelt partnership:

Personally I am for Roosevelt altho[ugh] I cannot understand his silence on the Anti-Lynch Bill or on Jim Crow policies. As much as it is necessary for him to be a strategist to hold some Southern strength he could take a stand. However, I feel Mrs. Roosevelt has covered his deficiencies, that she does portray what he would like to do so I am still for Roosevelt.<sup>103</sup>

FDR played the realist and ER the idealist. Together, the Roosevelts balanced a near-impossible coalition—racist Southerners and progressive African-American.

<sup>102</sup> ER to WW, 8 July 1943, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>103</sup> Original emphasis, Pearl Mitchell to WW, 11 October 1940, reel 19, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

### **Mrs. Roosevelt and American (Communist?) Youth**

Another group that piqued ER's interest and generated her help was American youth. As with African-Americans, Eleanor Roosevelt grew very concerned about the varied problems facing America's youth during her White House years. Her anxiety about youth joblessness in the depression led her to push for the formation of the National Youth Administration in 1934. She remained active within the NYA, pushing for further reform and expansion.<sup>104</sup> Her concern with youth-serving agencies led various youth-led organizations to solicit her help and patronage. Eleanor had to approach affiliation with such groups very carefully, as many were known to be leftist organizations or contain Communist or Socialist members. As Fascism and Nazism grew in Europe during the thirties and early forties, all totalitarian ideas were scorned by the general American public, who had a selective sensitivity to anything subversive of democratic ideals. Eleanor remained cautious in the beginning, but as she grew to know and like many of the youth leaders, she became more active in promotion of their causes. Aware of their laudable goals, she worked to counter Communist leanings within the organizations as she educated the public to not view everything as black and white.

As with her work on racial issues, Eleanor Roosevelt's activism with American youth both helped and hindered her husband's popularity. Supporting young people and helping with the NYA endeared them to her and in extension the President himself, garnering him votes that he might not have otherwise had. Unlike her work with blacks, however, Eleanor's affiliation with youth organizations drew criticism from a cross-section of the population. Distrust and outright fear of socialist and communist ideas pervaded the vast majority of Americans during that time. For the President's wife to

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<sup>104</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 537-38.

have contact with—let alone support for—any group that did not abhor leftist ideas was a huge irritant for many Americans. ER's work with youth was one involvement—although certainly not the only one—that targeted her as a “Communist”, a volatile allegation for any First Lady.

In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt became acquainted with Viola Ilma, editor and publisher of the new *Modern Youth Magazine* and later executive director of the Young Men's Vocational Organization, Inc. Trying to gain support for her magazine, Ilma appealed to ER:

You are interested in youth and we are certain that you understand the problems of this harassed young generation...

If you could sit at my desk and see what the youth of this country feels and thinks, you would realize the tremendous importance of keeping MODERN YOUTH alive. Does it not interest you, an outstanding leader of women, as the wife of the President of this country to hear the voice of youth?

Mrs. Roosevelt, I would consider it a distinct factor in getting your point of view in reference to the work that we are trying to do...

It is very important that we associated with the intelligent minds that have done so much towards the building of this nation. Opportunities are many that would take us down the wrong road. We have no radical, socialistic, or communistic theories in our future policy. Basically, we are Americans, and want to function as such.<sup>105</sup>

Ilma stressed two essential matters: the importance of the First Lady's opinions and the Americanism of her organization. Nonetheless, still wary of those she did not know a great deal about, ER replied:

If I favor a movement of any kind it at once draws great attention to it, and if anything is done by anyone connected with that movement which can be criticized it is at once brought back to me. Therefore, interested as I am in what you are doing, I cannot give you a letter for publication, any more than I would give a letter to any other new venture.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> VI to ER, 25 March 1933, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>106</sup> ER to VI, 15 April 1933, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

In time, ER accepted a subscription to the magazine, but instructed that it not be given any publicity.<sup>107</sup> During FDR's first term her attachment to causes was still wrapped with caution.

After 1936, Eleanor tried to keep her distance from various youth organizations, without always succeeding. At the beginning of 1938, Joseph Cadden, Chairman of the World Youth Congress, asked for ER's help in generating interest for his Congress among the youth of various countries. He gushed that "a personal letter from yourself urging them to participate in this meeting...will carry tremendous weight and we feel that it will insure their attendance."<sup>108</sup> Cadden needed the First Lady to give his Congress more legitimacy. Unfortunately for him, Eleanor could not provide the kind of letter he wished since "It would be looked upon as an attempt to influence the Government."<sup>109</sup>

At year's end, a representative from another youth organization asked for her participation. Joe Lash, who remained a good friend for the rest of her life, was then head of the American Student Union and wanted ER to speak at its national convention. After her initial refusal he replied, "Frankly, I am at a quandary at the present time. I know of your great sympathy for young people and patience in listening to our problems, so I have decided that the best thing to do is just to lay our problems before you."<sup>110</sup> Eleanor, wanting to remedy the situation, sent a memo to the President: "I refused but here is his second letter. I cannot go the 28<sup>th</sup>, but could offer to be there the 29<sup>th</sup> in the morning. Should I do so or have you in mind a better person to go?"<sup>111</sup> Probably uneasy about her attendance, FDR's returned memo only listed names for alternate speakers.

<sup>107</sup> MT to VI, 5 December 1935, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>108</sup> Joseph Cadden (JC) to ER, 18 January 1938, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>109</sup> ER to JC, 31 January 1938, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph Lash (JL) to ER, 14 November 1938, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>111</sup> ER to FDR, 18 November 1938, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

After several efforts to secure a speaker failed, Eleanor finally found a suitable replacement which the convention enjoyed.<sup>112</sup>

That same year, the First Lady faced a different situation, when a youth organization nominated her for an award she did not think she deserved nor should accept. The National Council of the American Youth Congress had established “an annual award for the person who during the year had done the most for young people in America.”<sup>113</sup> Joe Cadden informed ER of “a unanimous sentiment...that you should be named” as the award-winner.<sup>114</sup> Eleanor worried that her acceptance might be inappropriate for a woman of her position. Ambivalent about the award but not wanting to diminish the occasion, she declined:

I deeply appreciate your desire to make me the recipient of your first award which you are establishing. However, I feel that as long as I am in the White House perhaps it is not quite fair to give it to me for I have simply used opportunities which were at hand in just the way almost any other woman would have done. I feel that in this first recognition you should give it to an individual who has really made his opportunities to be helpful, and there must be many such throughout this nation. I will gladly come to your dinner on February 21 in order to give importance to the occasion.<sup>115</sup>

Her position as First Lady left her vulnerable to criticism of using her place for accruing honors and recognition. Although ER claimed that almost any woman with her opportunities would have done the same, history of course does not bear this out. More importantly, her bigger worry was that too much recognition of her work might backfire politically, causing her to scale down her activism.

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<sup>112</sup> ER to JL, 5 December 1938, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>113</sup> JC to ER, 5 December 1938, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> ER to JC, 12 December 1938, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

This worry came up again when Cadden supposedly used Eleanor's name to convince people to attend the Youth Congress' award dinner. ER related the story and the consequences:

Mrs. William H. Good of Brooklyn tells me that in asking her to the dinner on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February, my name was used, and that more was said about me than about your organization. I particularly do not want you to do that in connection with this dinner. In the first place, it is apt to do harm if you stress my connection too much....I will come to the dinner gladly and speak but I would certainly have some one else speak too, and, if possible, have a Republican preside. It will create political antagonism if you stress any connection with me.<sup>116</sup>

She envisioned a dinner as bipartisan as possible and one that kept her away from center stage. Later, she shied away from involvement with Joe Lash's organization and the sponsoring of a scholarship with the apology that "I do not feel I have observed enough of the work of the American Student Union to form an opinion of what they are doing."<sup>117</sup> Eleanor refused to show favoritism towards a youth association.

Behind the scenes, however, she grew stronger in her beliefs. As leftist labels were stuck on various youth organizations, she decided to ask FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover for advice. From the tone of their correspondence, the conservative Hoover and the liberal ER had a cordial relationship, mutually helping one another by sharing privileged information. That May she contacted him:

I have been told that you have some information on the American Youth Congress, either recently or taken some time ago, which would indicate a number of people are either Communists or Fascists. I would be extremely grateful for any information which you can give me on the subject.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>116</sup> ER to JC, 5 January 1939, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>117</sup> ER to JL, 12 May 1939, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>118</sup> ER to J. Edgar Hoover (JEH), 31 May 1939, reel 10, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Upon reading Hoover's secret FBI report, Eleanor did not see anything conclusive about the organization's leftist leanings. Not thinking too highly of the report, she voiced her opinions to Hoover:

I am very glad to see the records on the Youth Congress....

Of course, all these things which are said by Communist leaders, and the fact that they claim this organization and others to be Communistic, seems to me just so much nonsense. If their members choose to work for things which we in this country are keen to see done, this is very pleasing, but I hardly think it is much of a gain for the Communist cause except insofar as Communism may be changing to good Democracy....

It always amuses me to see young people's organizations treated as though they were already mature and settled. I am glad, however, to have this information as it shows me the type of fact which has been used to substantiate the...attitude that this organization is Communist controlled.<sup>119</sup>

Eleanor felt that many young people were misunderstood in their quest to improve their lives. The majority did not want to drastically alter the American way of life; they simply felt a need for more radical change to remedy the turbulent conditions of the thirties and forties.

At the end of 1939, Representative Martin Dies' Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) attacked various youth organizations, including Joe Cadden's American Youth Congress and Joe Lash's American Student Union. When ER heard the news, she refused to stand idly by any longer. Unannounced, the First Lady walked in after questioning had started on the first day of the HUAC hearing. Investigators stopped to take note of her presence and to invite her to sit with them. When she instead chose to remain with those being investigated, the press swarmed the committee room.<sup>120</sup> She had befriended many of these young people, convinced that underneath all the rumors they were true to democracy. Eleanor never testified or spoke on behalf of anyone, but her

<sup>119</sup> ER to JEH, 15 June 1939, reel 10, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>120</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 599.

presence was greatly appreciated by those under fire. She received a handwritten thank-you note from Lash following his testimony:

I want to express my thanks for your great kindness to me last week. I know that you have not wanted to stir up another hornet's nest by befriending the A.S.U., and so I am all the more grateful for your appearance on Friday morning when I testified.

I regret that I did not do a better job. When one's political opinions are in a violent state of flux, one should go to a hermitage rather than before a Congressional Committee with its thousand tongues. Next time better!<sup>121</sup>

By this time, Eleanor worried less about stirring up a "hornet's nest" than setting the record straight. To Lash she explained that she "was very glad to go to the Dies Committee hearing when you testified...I think on the whole you did a pretty good job."<sup>122</sup>

ER did worry when the American Youth Congress openly criticized everything the Dies Committee stood for. The AYC attacked the committee as a whole, rather than the specific issues for which their organization was targeted. She told Cadden, "it probably would have been better not to put yourself in the position where people who believe in the committee and feel that it has uncovered some very valuable things, are able to say that you haven't differentiated between the good and the bad."<sup>123</sup> A barrage against the committee as a whole implied approval of all leftist goals Dies abhorred. ER informed Cadden that Bernard Baruch had warned her that "he does not want me to be put in the position of tacitly disapproving of the good done by the committee because I disapprove of the bad."<sup>124</sup> She promised loyalty to Joe, but expected him to explain his actions to Baruch and others. ER also clarified her belief that a Communist ought not at

<sup>121</sup> JL to ER, 6 December 1939, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>122</sup> ER to JL, 11 December 1939, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>123</sup> ER to JC, 10 December 1939, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

present hold an appointive office, because “the fundamental difficulty on this subject...is no private property under the theory of Communism.”<sup>125</sup> Since this contradicted the US constitution, problems would always arise about fundamental rights. Eleanor concluded that “I do not see, when everyone is so very jittery, how anyone could appoint an avowed Communist to administer any governmental business under our present constitution, which he would undoubtedly wish to change.”<sup>126</sup> However, she remained open to new theories and compromises, and ended her letter with an invitation for discussion, saying, “I may be wrong about this and I will be glad to talk it over with you.”<sup>127</sup> It was always politically savvy to leave some room for debate. ER knew never to categorically condemn something without thorough knowledge of its pros and cons.

As she questioned the methods of the Dies Committee, ER strove to educate the public about the makeup of controversial organizations. Tired of being the bulls-eye of baseless accusations and unfounded rumors, her *My Day* columns that December discussed the hearings and her views on the “menace” of Communism. On December fifth, Eleanor discussed membership in an organization:

A conscientious person reads all the publications put out by the organization which they are joining, attends as many meetings as possible, knows as many people working in the organization as possible.

It seems to me that something which was said many years ago applies in this instance: “By their works ye shall know them.” When an organization stands up under this amount of investigation, I fail to see how there can be hidden either a Communistic or Fascist program or a surreptitious control of any kind. It is true that there might be a number of members who might willingly work for the objectives of an organization and yet belong openly or secretly to subversive groups, but you cannot fight shadows and you must wait till you find the objectives of an organization are being changed or interfered with.<sup>128</sup> (*My Day*, 12/5/39)

<sup>125</sup> ER to JC, 22 December 1939, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *My Day*, 5 December 1939, in Chadakoff, ed., *My Day*, 148.

Everyone who knew the news of the day understood of which groups Eleanor spoke. She strove to defend those she now considered friends. As she became close with them, she learned the details of their organizations and the aims they worked for. She realized that some of the programs of her husband's New Deal blurred the line between liberalism and socialism. The youth organizations, in their quest for improvement, had noticed this earlier than most. Many were not trying to turn a Democracy into Communism, but to make communism more democratic. A few days later she announced in *My Day*: "Let's fight realities with all that we have. Let's fight for our Democracy and our Bill of Rights, and wherever we find things in which we do not believe, let's be free to express ourselves, but let us pray not to be dominated by fears or disturbed by nightmares."<sup>129</sup> Eleanor's tribute to freedom of expression soon loosed demons in the minds of conservatives everywhere.

After her opinions appeared in the *My Day* columns, she received a critical letter from Charles B. Kennan, a New York attorney. He referred to an article in *America*, the Catholic weekly, regarding an AYC member who also attended and spoke at the World Congress of the Communist International, which he believed proved that Communism was prevalent in the American Youth Congress. Wanting her to set the public straight, he admonished the First Lady:

In light of the above [a description of the *America* report], I think you owe your readers another column on this subject. I cannot believe that you would deliberately try to distort the truth nor to spread false information. Assuming that *America's* report is accurate, ipso facto your beliefs were incorrect about the absence of Communism in the Youth Congress. But since your column has a much wider circulation than *America*, the ethics of the situation, aside from good reporting, would seem to require that you print an admission that your beliefs

<sup>129</sup> *My Day*, 13 December 1939, in Chadakoff, ed., *My Day*, 149.

were wrong or else point out wherein *America* errs in the clear implication that the American Youth Congress is Communist led.<sup>130</sup>

Eleanor's lost reply could have been based on two prior opinions: she did not think youth organizations should be treated as if they were mature and settled, so one should not criticize their ups and downs as they grew; and people with joint membership in multiple organizations did not necessarily promote all those groups believing all the same things. The overall mission and activities of an organization were the ultimate tests, not the varied and ever-changing opinions of its membership.

To prove her loyalty, ER helped the Youth Congress leadership organize a "pilgrimage" to Washington in January 1940. They called it a "Citizenship Institute" to dispel any militant undertones the idea of a pilgrimage might have. The First Lady spared no effort in helping with the institute, even organizing a committee of congressional wives to find free lodging for delegates. She secured lecture halls and arranged for a White House reception, and even persuaded FDR to speak to the group.<sup>131</sup> While Eleanor remained steadfastly supportive of her young friends, the President had skepticism about their ulterior motives. What started as a movement to revise the neutrality act towards Britain and France degenerated into a protest to keep America out of war. Speakers at the Youth Congress claimed that the administration's preoccupation with the crisis of war endangered the well-being of Americans. When FDR spoke, he made no attempts to humor the young people or speak as an equal. He cautioned them not to "seek or expect Utopia overnight" and warned them not to make resolutions about that which they did not have complete knowledge.<sup>132</sup> He also condemned the Soviet

<sup>130</sup> Charles B. Kennan to ER, 16 December 1939, reel 3, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>131</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 601-602.

<sup>132</sup> FDR, as quoted in Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 604.

Union's dictatorship and hoped that American Communists only worked for change within the constitutional boundaries. Most Americans would have agreed with the message in FDR's "verbal spanking", but the Youth Congress erupted with boos and hisses.<sup>133</sup> Labor leader John L. Lewis followed the President's speech with one of his own, mocking FDR's points and inciting the crowd with renewed vigor. The Youth Congress cheered Lewis and all speeches that sounded isolationist themes.

An inwardly shaken First Lady stood firm and resolute as she concluded the Institute with an hour-long question and answer session. She defended the President's speech, noting that: "I could agree with you right this minute that I don't want war, but I don't know what you might say under different conditions six months from now."<sup>134</sup> She ended by affirming her fondness for many of the youth leaders and wishing that she knew all the others personally. Though ER advocated many of the same views as the President, in marked contrast the group gave her a standing ovation. In an article for *Liberty* magazine, ER later discussed her part in the Citizenship Institute:

I hold no office which requires respect. The President does. That is why bad manners on the lawn of the White House was worse than bad manners in the auditorium. I did not go to answer questions for the Citizenship Institute as the President's wife. I went as Eleanor Roosevelt, to answer, as honestly as I could, questions that were going to be put me as an individual. I had the obligation not to place the President or the administration in any difficulties through my answers. Outside of that, I had an obligation to be truthful and give whatever information I could. The young people had no obligation to listen to me because they had asked me to come, but no obligation whatsoever to agree, nor to suppress their feelings, whatever they might be.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 605.

<sup>134</sup> ER as quoted in Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 607.

<sup>135</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, "Why I Still Believe in the Youth Congress," *Liberty* 17 (20 April 1940):30-32, in Allida M. Black, editor, *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essential Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 378-79.

Her article provides valuable insight into how she thought she should perform her role as the President's wife. In desire, if not always practice, she avoided comments directly antagonistic to the Presidential administration. Eleanor did not want to abuse her position by imposing her views on anyone, but hoped to use it to the people's advantage by sharing useful information to which she was privy.

Criticisms from both the right and the left were hard to deflect. Even more damaging than comments from outsiders were those from people with whom she worked. She wanted the government to be a body that would not discriminate against youth organizations because of the composition of its membership. Eleanor hoped that others in the administration agreed with her that individual members' beliefs did not necessarily signal the group's attitude. When Charles Taussig of the National Youth Administration decided that the youth organizations had to change in order to receive his support, Eleanor disagreed. As she explained her view:

It seems to me it is hardly the place of the NYA to enter into any activity to discredit anything done by youth-led organizations. You may, as individuals, disapprove and say so, but a branch of the government, which is supposed to be attempting to face youth's problems helpfully, to discredit a group of young people, seems a trifle unwise. You must, however, use your own judgment.

....It is wrong for us to try to use force of any kind to do this, whether that force is the withholding of financial assistance or the threatening to uphold some group or groups.

I am telling you this because I am a little afraid that some of the people in the older groups will attempt to do this, and if they do I want you prepared before hand [*sic*] of my attitude.<sup>136</sup>

Eleanor believed the government should be less partisan and instead establish a working relationship with all willing citizens.

After the unhappy turn of events at the Citizenship Institute, Eleanor pushed the youth organizations towards a clarification of their views. If only they had specific

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<sup>136</sup> ER to Charles Taussig (CT), 11 March 1940, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

principles for which they stood, people might find less reason to attack them. In order to remedy the situation, she arranged a confidential meeting with the President for various youth leaders. As she explained it: "I have felt for some time that it would be an advantage to both the President and some of the youth leaders if they could confer together on some subjects of interest to both."<sup>137</sup> Open discussion might clear up any confusion about where youth and the administration stood.

Knowing this meeting might also incite controversy, she shielded the President from as much criticism as possible. She informed Cadden that "The only thing I am counting on is that no one will quote the President, and I am going to state quite clearly that in order to get any free expression of opinion from the President, they must expect that if certain things are quoted as coming from him they may be denied."<sup>138</sup> She pressed the point that "the position of the AYC has got to be cleared up."<sup>139</sup> No youth organization could gain widespread acceptance, let alone approval, without a solid aim that did not stray too far from the ideals of American democracy. ER believed that each side (youth and the government) could work together to reach a more common ground worthy of the ideals of both.

The meeting did not go as planned. Although various youth groups were present, the more radical wing of the Youth Congress dominated discussion. They stuck to their isolationist sentiments and did not much listen to the arguments the President offered. Eleanor could not get them to clarify a position on the situation in Europe, and so she backed away from their organization because she feared the repercussions. ER knew that affairs across the ocean were rapidly deteriorating, and she realized by this time that her

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<sup>137</sup> ER to Molly Yard, 26 March 1940, reel 20, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>138</sup> ER to JC, 18 April 1940, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>139</sup> ER to JC, 12 May 1940, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

husband might be forced into war. She supported his realistic viewpoint, aware that though there might not be any perfect options, sometimes some were better than others.

After the meeting, she advised Joe Cadden:

I see no reason now and I never have, why you should put the young communist league out. I do, however, think that the AYC will have to pass a resolution in which it specifically condemns aggression by Hitler and Stalin. The fact that the communists, through the Daily Worker, and other groups entirely independent, or under the influence, refused to condemn the invasion of Finland, has made so many people feel that the dominating influence of the AYC is communist....

...I realize that there will not only be young communists, but many other people and groups who may not like condemning Stalin or the Soviet Union by name, but I think that at the present time, with the Nazi pact a fact,...the people of the United States have become convinced that the infiltration of alien ideas is bad in any country and they will not support an organization that will not clearly go on record as to where it stands.

We have got to face the fact that when this war comes to an end, it is either going to mean a Nazi-Communist controlled Europe or a British-French controlled Europe...You may not like either one whole-heartedly, you may think you should condemn invasion on both sides in the past, but this is the present and the future which we are facing, and you have this question before you.<sup>140</sup>

Eleanor knew that American Communists did not envision a country identical to Russia, but she also understood the real fears of the American public. Even if some Communist ideals might be workable in the United States, the ideology scared the American people as circumstances in Europe unfolded. With war erupting, ER did not think it was the time to tolerate ideals that few would take the time to understand in the current situation.

A few weeks later she again told Joe:

We have to simplify certain questions today and make up our minds whether on the whole the English people stand for a more real type of democracy than the nazis do. I happen to believe that they do. A nazi dominated world seems to me [a] much more difficult world in which to promote many of the ideals in which we believe.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>140</sup> ER to JC, 12 May 1940, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>141</sup> ER to JC, 26 May 1940, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

She did not force him into her opinion, arguing that the conditions of the time made the situation more black and white. Fundamentally, the Constitution was and would always remain the backbone of the American system.

When the AYC encouraged Eleanor to speak at their pilgrimage that year, she declined. She reasoned:

I have decided that it would be impossible for me to speak for your group without implying a sponsorship of the attitude of the AYC, and as I consider that attitude as illustrated recently by your wire to the London group, is really giving extremely poor leadership to the youth of America, I do not feel that I should speak to any gathering of the Youth Congress.

I recognize entirely your right and the right of the Congress to hold any opinion and to advocate any position which they hold, but when I disagree, and think it is as important as I do in this case, I must guard against any misunderstanding of my own position. This position has nothing personal in it in regard to any of you and I hope I shall see you very soon...<sup>142</sup>

The AYC that supported the ideals of communism while Communists were fomenting war overseas was not a group that the First Lady could affiliate with. She also made clear that although she had taken an interest in their causes and had in turn interested others, “The administration, as such, has never had any attitude towards the AYC.”<sup>143</sup> Again and again, ER stressed that her activities were not necessarily supported by the administration. No one in the President’s camp, including Eleanor, would touch the newest policy of the AYC. Even Joe Lash, an avid supporter of youth-led organizations, admitted that “I do not associate with them...with [their] hostility to the Allies or opposition to the Administration.”<sup>144</sup> Their anti-Roosevelt, isolationist orientation alienated not only the leaders of the country, but many who would otherwise advocate the organization of youth to obtain the objectives of young people.

<sup>142</sup> ER to JC, 16 January 1941, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>143</sup> ER to JC, 29 January 1941, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>144</sup> JL to ER, 6 May 1940, reel 13, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

The American Youth Congress finally clarified its exact position, as ER had asked. The result was dismaying. Joe Cadden's January 1941 Statement of the American Youth Congress failed to clear up the issue of Communists in its midst, though it boldly proclaimed their presence. The Statement repudiated the administration, including Mrs. Roosevelt, for failing them by a withdrawal of support. After reading the "Statement", ER wrote Cadden: "Of course I am personally deeply sorry that I find myself in disagreement with you, but I am afraid I will not be with you in public ways because both of us seem very well able to stick to the things we believe in."<sup>145</sup> With this letter, she broke cleanly with the most radical of the youth-led organizations. When the AYC advocated a controversial American Youth Act that summer, however, ER still took the time to try privately to sway Cadden's opinion:

I am not working with the American Youth Congress for the reason which I have stated several times, namely, that I consider your attitude on the foreign policy of this country injurious to youth and to the nation. I can not work with you because I should hereby seem to condone your attitude. None of the things which you and I wish to see done in the United States of America will ever be possible to achieve in a world where either Hitler's nazism or Stalin's communism is a dominant force.<sup>146</sup>

She added that a meeting between her and the AYC would not be helpful since its leaders seemed unbending.

Eleanor Roosevelt remained friends with those she had been friends with before her break from the organization, but she could not conceive of support for the group as a whole. To ER, their policies subverted the aims of a government heading inevitably into war. Her involvement with youth-led organizations in the thirties and early forties, especially the American Youth Congress, created a great deal of tension between her and

<sup>145</sup> ER to JC, 1 February 1941, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>146</sup> ER to JC, 15 May 1941, reel 4, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

FDR's advisors. FDR appreciated a direct tap into their viewpoint, but he could not afford to cater to the resolute isolationists and radical leftists that emerged after 1939. Eleanor tried to give them the benefit of the doubt: sitting next to them at the Dies Hearing, educating the public about organization membership, and responding to critics by illustrating the AYC's supposedly non-subversive belief in leftist ideals. After telling the American citizenry to learn more before making accusations, she was forced to admit that maybe she had gotten in a little too far. While she knew more than most, she had deluded herself about the organization's true aims.

Although radicals were not the total makeup of the AYC, they were some of the people she befriended. Eleanor believed in the promise of youth organizations, just as Joe Lash did, yet in the end they were both trumped by radicals like Joe Cadden. Her attachment to these organizations, especially in the critical years of 1939 and 1940, hurt FDR domestically. The President distanced himself early, beginning with the January 1940 Citizenship Institute. ER did not see the light for some time. Once the AYC's new message became painfully obvious, however, Eleanor sided unconditionally with her husband. She knew that there was no longer time to debate the possible merits of communism or socialism. A time arrived when she knew the choice was between the British and French or Germans and Soviets. In war's black and white world, she chose democracy. Once ER recognized the true views of certain youth-led organizations she de-affiliated from them, even though she still liked many of their leaders. With such important issues at stake, she could no longer appear to dissent from FDR's pro-allied policies. Eleanor divorced herself from everything the AYC did or said because she did not want to give her critics any more ammunition.

<sup>141</sup> Stella Reading (SR) to ER, 1 December 1939, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>142</sup> ER to SR, 3 December 1939, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

### ER and the Office of Civilian Defense

Although her friendships with youth leaders turned some heads and shook others, Eleanor Roosevelt's work with the Office of Civilian Defense threw her directly into the national spotlight. It was both the pinnacle and the low-point of her political "career". Everything came into play at the OCD: ER's "excessive" political activism, alleged abuse by the First Lady of her "position", charges of Communist sympathies, and a resurgence of racial tensions.

The President created the OCD in the spring of 1941 "with a broad mandate to enlist men, women, and children as defense volunteers."<sup>147</sup> The basic idea for FDR's executive order came from Lady Stella Reading, wife of the British Ambassador to the United States. A friend of the First Lady, Lady Reading headed the Women's Volunteer Services for Civilian Defence in Great Britain and reported much success in her organization's endeavors. In December of 1939 she wrote ER that Alice McLean was supposed to see the First Lady at Hyde Park to discuss the establishment of a similar organization in the United States. Lady Reading expressed to ER that "Obviously we would be delighted if a similar Organisation were formed in America," although she understood that the support should not come from a Brit but from "an entirely spontaneous movement among large numbers of American women themselves."<sup>148</sup> At that point, ER did not feel "that this country is ready for an organization similar to [Reading's]."<sup>149</sup> Not yet fully aware of the horrors of the latest world war, ER thought many Americans "still feel secure in our isolation, and until they are shaken of that belief,

<sup>147</sup> Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 280.

<sup>148</sup> Stella Reading (SR) to ER, 1 December 1939, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>149</sup> ER to SR, 8 December 1939, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

it would be difficult to accomplish much.”<sup>150</sup> She did at least acknowledge that American women had much strength and potential, and hoped to mobilize them when the time was right. So far, isolationism and poor timing combined to leave ER uncommitted.

In 1941, however, war loomed on the horizon and the United States stepped up its efforts to help the allied cause. In February of that year Lady Reading happily reported to ER that “we have found quite definitely there is an immense value in having an all embracing organization so that voluntary work can contribute continuity of service.”<sup>151</sup> Wanting to use this idea in her own country and build a spirit of sharing and sacrificing for a strengthened democracy, Eleanor finally convinced FDR of the essential nature of civilian defense.<sup>152</sup> His Executive Order outlined broad duties for the OCD, including: civilian protection, volunteer participation, morale responsibilities, and securing the cooperation of federal agencies in meeting the needs of communities resulting from the defense program.<sup>153</sup> FDR appointed New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to head the organization, with ER giving advice and aid in an unofficial and behind-the-scenes capacity. As the OCD located its place among the many organizations of the Roosevelt administration, ER remained wary of excessive publicity, thinking it better “to stay out of the limelight until a pattern of efficiency and usefulness had been established.”<sup>154</sup> La Guardia, however, concentrated almost solely on civilian protection at the expense of the many other areas the OCD was to cover. Eleanor could not accept such a breach of her plan.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> SR to ER, 17 February 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>152</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 637.

<sup>153</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 640.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 640.

By fall ER was unhappy with the way things were going at the OCD under La Guardia's leadership. At the end of August, Eleanor was quoted in a press conference as condemning the work of the OCD. Thinking her words had been misconstrued, she informed La Guardia about the inaccurate reporting:

I was asked by one of the women reporters if I was completely satisfied with the work done by woman volunteers in civilian defense, and I say that I was not, and went on to explain that we are not fully launched on a real program; that there was still much to do.

I hope, if you read anything about it, that you do not think that I was in any way implying any criticism of you. I know that you feel as I do, that we have a big job ahead of us and are only just getting started.<sup>155</sup>

LaGuardia *did* take it as "criticism", especially after Eleanor charged that the OCD was remiss in its failure to enlist youth. He confessed to her: "There are 135,000,000 people in this country. The criticism of 134,999,999 wouldn't touch me. Yours did."<sup>156</sup> He knew that the opinion of this First Lady counted more than that of any before her.

To quell dissent and to see if she could back up her words, La Guardia offered ER a position as assistant director. Eleanor had many misgivings about accepting the position of OCD Assistant Director: it was unprecedented for a First Lady to hold an official government job and it would throw her into the spotlight as never before. She could, however, make sure all of her ideas came to fruition. In the end, the benefits outweighed her reservations. She started in September. When friend and actress Helen Gahagan Douglas congratulated her on her new job, ER replied: "I made up my mind to do this job because, from all sides, I had complaints about the lack of progress and I may be able to push things along."<sup>157</sup> She liked channeling her energies into one job, and her

<sup>155</sup> ER to Fiorello La Guardia (FL), 29 August 1941, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>156</sup> Fiorello La Guardia, as quoted in Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 642.

<sup>157</sup> ER to Helen Gahagan Douglas (HD), 16 September 1941, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

busy schedule eased tensions with her husband.<sup>158</sup> Frustrated that many liberal programs had fallen by the wayside, ER could now refocus the purpose of those discarded programs into civilian defense and morale.

Eleanor immersed herself in her work at the Office of Civilian Defense. She notified Esther Lape in early October that it was “practically swallowing up all my time.”<sup>159</sup> She continued her correspondence with Lady Reading concerning her undulated interest: an allied effort between the two influential women. When ER accepted the Assistant Director position, Lady Reading wrote: “I do hope you will let me know if there is anything at all that I can do in the way of sending you information or help in regard to Civil Defence.”<sup>160</sup> Eleanor described the current situation:

I am trying to organize our volunteers here. The program was not developing rapidly and after much urging I decided to do what I could do. We have an amazing reservoir of volunteers ready and willing....I think we are starting.<sup>161</sup>

ER inherited no shortage of problems: established government agencies were wary of the new defense programs taking over their responsibilities; the Army and the Navy were rarely on speaking terms with one another. Soon, though, she developed a clear working concept of her side of the OCD and transformed its mission from civilian participation to community mobilization.<sup>162</sup> She hired qualified and experienced workers such as Paul Kellog and Jonathan Daniels. Eleanor’s connection with defense programs lent them much credibility and got communities excited about participating. The OCD had not quite expanded to the level and breadth of Lady Reading’s Voluntary Services, most

<sup>158</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 642.

<sup>159</sup> ER to Esther Lape (EL), 7 October 1941, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>160</sup> SR to ER, 17 September 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>161</sup> ER to SR, 4 October 1941, reel 15, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>162</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 646.

likely because bombs were not falling on American cities as was the case in London and Canterbury.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor meant new life for the OCD. Organizing for civilian defense made perfect sense once America had been directly attacked. Eleanor and La Guardia quickly arranged a trip to the Pacific to boost morale and strengthen their civilian-defense organizations. While Pearl Harbor vitalized the OCD, ER realized on the Pacific trip that La Guardia needed to be replaced.<sup>163</sup> Her opinion was seconded by others, such as Cornelia Bryce Pinchot, who informed ER that there was “a mounting tide of criticism about the mayor’s handling of OCD...”<sup>164</sup> La Guardia had just been reelected as mayor, and many felt he should simply concentrate on one demanding job. As to the other OCD director, Pinchot added: “Does the President understand the only thing holding the OCD together is your steadiness, your wide knowledge of the country, and the confidence people have in you.”<sup>165</sup> The administration soon divided into those who liked La Guardia and those who liked Eleanor. Eventually the First Lady won out. The President forced the mayor to step down and replaced him with James Landis, ER’s top choice.

The change did not silence critics, and much responsibility shifted to the First Lady. James Landis, handpicked by ER herself, was perceived in some circles to be “pink” and sympathetic to Communism.<sup>166</sup> Some congressmen then became interested in other appointments the First Lady made, such as Joseph Lash and the actor Melvyn Douglas. A few members of an advisory group helping ER coordinate volunteer services

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 648.

<sup>164</sup> Cornelia Bryce Pinchot (CBP) to ER, 24 December 1941, reel 14, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 649.

were found to have been members of organizations on Representative Dies' blacklist.<sup>167</sup> Besides hiring supposed Communist sympathizers, Eleanor's staff included others who received a salary thought to be way above what congressmen deemed proper. It did not help that some well-paid workers, such as Betty Lindley and Mayris Chaney, were also friends of Eleanor. On top of the condemnations for inefficiency, Communism, and cronyism, the volatile charge of integration was piled on as well. ER was attacked for wanting to de-segregate southern civilian-defense groups and for including African-Americans on her staff.

Those bitter onslaughts confirmed her deep-seated fears that she could not hold an official post in her husband's administration. Although she enjoyed the work and made many improvements, she did not feel she should remain an official part of the OCD leadership. She decided to resign in February of 1942 amidst the flurry of controversy, hoping that the changes she had made might persist after her departure. She confided to Cornelia Pinchot, another member of the OCD:

You came in at the beginning and I am sure you feel as I do, that the work is now organized, that we have good people to carry it on and that it will perform a very vital and important service to our country.

I am resigning because I am sure I will continue to be a focal point of attack, and I do not want to jeopardize a good program.<sup>168</sup>

Just as in so many other areas of her public life during her White House years, Eleanor sacrificed her own desires for the good of a certain group or for her husband. Although she did much good, her work made her too easy a target for criticism.

Despite a vocally critical press and with some in Congress out to get her, the First Lady still received a great deal of support from friends and associates undeterred by

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 649.

<sup>168</sup> ER to CBP, 19 February 1942, reel 14, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

allegations. Cornelia Pinchot replied to ER's letter about resigning, saying "I can't bear the thought of your leaving the OCD—and am afraid without you that its usefulness will be much curtailed."<sup>169</sup> Pinchot wanted Eleanor to realize the value of her sacrifice:

I understand why you resigned, of course. As usual, you were thinking not along personal lines, but what is best for the Nation. In this case, however, I feel that your judgment was wrong—wrong because you undervalue and minimize the effect of your own contribution....

I am certain the influence and impact of your passionate integrity will continue to affect National morale in the difficult days ahead—but I wish that it could also have continued to have had its place in the official organization of our government.<sup>170</sup>

Pinchot believed that ER's work had been and still was essential to the proper functioning of the OCD, despite what her critics had to say. Melvyn Douglas also wrote her after her resignation to express his "concern over the fact that my coming into the picture may possibly have had something to do with the uproar that took place," and that she or Landis only had to advise him that his stepping out of the picture would simplify things.<sup>171</sup> He agreed with her that "the job to be done by the Office of Civilian Defense is too important to be in any way hampered by considerations of personality."<sup>172</sup> Eleanor appreciated his thoughtfulness, but she knew that his work was valuable to the organization and she hoped he would not resign. "The attack was on me," she reminded him, "and not on you or your work."<sup>173</sup> ER "had never intended to stay indefinitely and was planning to resign quietly when the reorganization was complete."<sup>174</sup> The prior night she had explained to the public her reasons for resigning and her own thoughts on the attacks on the OCD. She was "surprised by the number of telegrams of approval," which

<sup>169</sup> CBP to ER, 20 February 1942, reel 14, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Melvyn Douglas (MD) to ER, 21 February 1942, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> ER to MD, 23 February 1942, reel 8, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

showed “an understanding and an appreciation of the whole question—liberals versus reactionaries.”<sup>175</sup> This out pouring of support proved to her that there were still many who understood her predicament.

After her resignation, the columnist Raymond Clapper published some highly critical pieces about Eleanor which angered her many friends. Regarding her work with OCD, Clapper insisted that “half the trouble around there [the OCD] could be got rid of if the President would haul her out of the place.”<sup>176</sup> Clapper went exclaimed:

It is incredible that President Roosevelt will allow this situation to continue much longer. It has become a public scandal...

How can you have any kind of morale with a subordinate employee, who happens to be the wife of the President of the United States, flitting in and out between lecture engagements to toss a few more pets into nice jobs.<sup>177</sup>

ER’s friend Paul Kellog condemned the columns as “execrable,” sending Eleanor a copy of his letter to Clapper about his poison.<sup>178</sup> Regarding his first reading of the columns about the First Lady’s work with the OCD, Kellog told Clapper he was “recoiling so sharply at them that I found myself speculating on what could have possibly animated you.”<sup>179</sup> Kellog explained his views on ER’s activities and that he himself got his first chance to work with Mrs. Roosevelt at the OCD. He thought she brought a great deal of needed order to the office. Kellog admitted no knowledge of the situations involving Melvyn Douglas or Mayris Chaney, but “put a pinch of salt on the hue and cry about them by people eager to put pins in the Administration.”<sup>180</sup> He did know firsthand about the Landis appointment, which he also felt was justly deserved: a well-qualified man for

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Raymond Clapper, “How About It, F.D.?”, *newspaper unknown*, in Bess Furman to ER, 6 February 1942, reel 9, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Paul Kellog (PK) to ER, 9 February 1942, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>179</sup> PK to Raymond Clapper, 9 February 1942, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

OCD work. About other staffing appointments which brought ER under additional attack, Kellog knew that the people chosen were highly experienced in similar work and that the choices were decided upon after a thorough search for the right people. He scolded Clapper:

Yet you lump these three key appointments, under Mrs. Roosevelt, and on her initiative, as expressive of her disruptive qualities. They were chosen after a canvass of the field by her associates; in one case lifting the appointee out of another important public job, and in the other in competition with posts offered by major government departments.

And you ignore the whole central core and scheme of work, which has been Mrs. Roosevelt's lively and active concern these past weeks, and which to my mind offers the best chance to bring team-play and results in a whole range of activities by various agencies, from Washington down, and from the local community up....

Forgive me, but as I see it, you owe it to Mrs. Roosevelt, to her team mates and to a significant wartime effort thus to get at the facts—and to bear witness to them.<sup>181</sup>

Eleanor thanked Kellog for his unwavering support and hoped for the sake of the OCD, that Clapper would further investigate his own charges. She feared she had alienated the columnist when she had earlier disagreed with him about the American Youth Congress. Where Clapper saw the AYC leaders as communist-controlled, Eleanor chose to give them a pass until more solid proof was brought forth. She told Kellog, "His criticism of them was very destructive, I thought, and I spoke to him about it. I am sure he did not like my criticism."<sup>182</sup> Eleanor added:

I am not in the least disturbed by this latest attack. It is purely political and made by the same people who have fought the NYA, CCC, WPA, Farm Security, etc. I shall be sorry if it lessens the effectiveness of the OCD and hurts any of the people involved.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> ER to PK, 10 February 1942, reel 11, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

Eleanor had come to realize that she could no longer take things personally: being the First Lady meant she was unavoidably subject to the rules of the dangerous Washington game of bare-knuckles politics. Attacks were continually made on the liberal programs of FDR's administration and her involvement with any of them sometimes exacerbated the problem.

Eleanor also took the time to make amends with La Guardia following the controversy. She wrote him:

...I want to tell you that I am very grateful to you for letting me organize a part of the work in which you did not believe. I think it showed great forbearance on your part, because you must have wanted to stop a great many things.

I feel that you did a remarkable job of organizing the protective side and I want to thank you for having given me an organization of the civilian mobilization which I consider vital to the well-being of our people.<sup>184</sup>

Eleanor may not have made complete amends, because subsequent correspondence from La Guardia contains a sour tone.<sup>185</sup> With their OCD difficulties sufficiently behind them by 1943, Eleanor was invited by La Guardia to attend a New York orchestra concert, even though an invitation from the City was never needed for her "because I just feel that you are an important and big part of our City government."<sup>186</sup> Only temporarily did The OCD Affair spoil the affection between the First Lady and the mayor of New York.

On the whole, Eleanor's foray into the OCD proved to be among the most controversial activities of her career. Her official position left her even more vulnerable than usual to political and personal sniping from all angles. In her autobiography, ER recalled her mixed emotions:

I was glad to have turned it over to somebody else. I had done the best I could while I was there, but as long as I held a government position, even as a

<sup>184</sup> ER to FL, 18 February 1942, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>185</sup> See FL to ER, 21 April 1942 and 27 April 1942, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>186</sup> FL to ER, 6 December 1943, reel 12, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

volunteer, I offered a way to get at the president and in war time it is not politically wise to attack the president. The episode was short but it was one of the experiences I least regretted leaving behind me.<sup>187</sup>

What had started as an exciting challenge quickly soured for someone so stuck in the spotlight. A Gallup Poll at the end of that year asked “*Is there anything about Mrs. Roosevelt of which you especially disapprove?*”<sup>188</sup> Her work at the OCD might have prompted such popular answers as “*she is too much in the public eye*” and “*she is always getting her nose into the Government’s business,*” as well as the less frequently mentioned criticism that she “*commercialized her position as the President’s wife.*”<sup>189</sup> The OCD episode was, in a sense, a culmination of her past controversies. A reputation she had accumulated from previous associations with blacks, youths, and communists came back to haunt her with great force while at the OCD. ER also realized that timing was not on her side either: her husband’s need to run a successful war would best be done with the minimum of distractions. The war was the dominant concern of the early 1940s, overwhelming all other issues. Eleanor knew the importance of success for the allied cause. She had to make clear that she did not condone communism. One way to do this was to resign from the Office of Civilian Defense.

### **Eleanor’s Red Friend: Anna Louise Strong**

Eleanor’s work with blacks, youths, and the OCD left her exposed to attacks from many sides. Critics often labeled her as “socialist” and “communist” for her views. Some convicted her of guilt by association. As criticism mounted throughout her White House years, Eleanor was corresponding with Anna Louise Strong, a friend, an avowed believer

<sup>187</sup> Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 250.

<sup>188</sup> Gallup Poll on 9 December 1942 in Gallup, 356-7.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

in socialism, and a staunch defender of Joseph Stalin. Publicly harangued for her friendships, these private letters exhibit unambiguously that Eleanor wanted nothing to do with either communism or socialism. An avid believer in democracy, ER continually and patiently tutored Strong as to how and why she felt such allegiance to the American way of life.<sup>190</sup>

In 1935, social reformer Lillian Wald introduced Anna Louise Strong to Eleanor Roosevelt as “the girl who went to Russia...and for many reasons knows Russia now better than anybody else....”<sup>191</sup> ER was eager to learn more about Russia as events heated up on the other side of the world. Still, it was quite bold for the First Lady to invite one of the most prominent American radicals to dinner at the White House. Anna Louise Strong was a very persuasive and active woman, always involving others in what she found interesting. In this manner, Strong was not unlike Eleanor, and they soon became friends. Though their personalities were similar, the views they advocated were quite divergent. From the late 1930s into the 1940s, Eleanor’s faith in democracy grew as her tolerance for communism and socialism shrank. Strong, on the other hand, championed socialism, then communism, and always Stalinism. She initially had sympathy and respect for the fascist Franco AND communist Stalin; dictators not looked upon favorably by many others in America.<sup>192</sup> Eleanor’s friendship and correspondence with Strong reveal much about the First Lady’s personality and her core political

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<sup>190</sup> Anna Louise Strong is mentioned in neither of Eleanor Roosevelt’s autobiographies (*The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* and *This I Remember*) nor in many of her biographies. Of all the work included in the bibliography, she is most extensively covered in Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 505-507; and Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 567-68, 591-592, 593-94, 596. Even in these works, however, the relationship between Strong and ER is not thoroughly examined for the friendship that remained strong as viewpoints significantly diverged. This analysis hopes to use their correspondence to illustrate ER’s continued commitment to democracy in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

<sup>191</sup> Lillian Wald to ER, 17 January 1935, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>192</sup> Cook, *Volume Two*, 343.

convictions. Since they were friends, Eleanor continually gave Strong a chance to defend her opinions, knowing they were largely anti-Allied and in ways anti-American. Incredibly open-minded, ER did not break off her relationship with Strong simply because she championed a different way of life. They both learned from one another, exchanging perspectives and clarifying the meaning of world events. Eleanor also included her husband in some of their exchanges, facilitating a forum of discussion between the White House and a rock-ribbed radical and “Red”.

When ER and Strong first met at a White House dinner in 1935, Strong proclaimed that the New Deal would not work and that FDR’s America would eventually come to an impasse. The First Lady pondered this outlook, advising Strong that “we are more hopeful than you are.”<sup>193</sup> Two years later, the work of the Roosevelts had changed Strong’s mind:

Two years ago when I first met you I wrote you a contrary opinion. The words I have forgotten, but they implied that the President would come to an impasse and would not be able to go further, and that America also would repeat the bloody class struggles of Europe. You replied: “We are more optimistic”... Well, now I retract my words... There will of course be struggle—there is bloody struggle even today in parts of America. But these things are relative; they may be worsened by stupidity in high places, or greatly lessened by intelligence. As long as we have good-will combined with brains and organization, as we have today at the head of our government, there is no “impasse.”...

I am beginning to believe—and I am not a person who believes such things easily,—that you and he [ER and FDR] will go down in American history as a twin force which, more than any other persons, helped America through those difficult transitions which all nations are making in our generation—with a minimum of pain. By a most amazing combination of intelligence with daring, of good-will with shrewd knowledge of personalities and organization.<sup>194</sup>

Strong’s letter shows her immense respect and admiration for both Eleanor and her husband. Her words even evoke a strong faith in America and her leaders. Strong had

<sup>193</sup> ER to Anna Louise Strong (ALS), 5 February 1935, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>194</sup> ALS to ER, 29 May 1937, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

seen the New Deal in action and liked what she saw. She sounded hopeful that the Roosevelts would continue to navigate America through the dangerous transitional times of their generation. Strong's gushing praise is difficult to reconcile with the bulk of her beliefs, especially when her allegiance to the American way of life faltered as she witnessed events unfold in Europe and Asia.

Anna Louise Strong's initial interests lay with Spain as the Civil War there created a chaotic nation. After visiting front-line trenches in Madrid, she told ER that she saw a great deal of confidence among "Men who feel themselves at the prow of man's progress against fascism."<sup>195</sup> She reported that the anti-Fascists were sure of victory in the near future and that "most of us have sized them up wrong. Franco's not going to rule these people. The only question is whether he will start a world war with his German-Italian intervention."<sup>196</sup> In 1937, Strong began to organize a committee to give aid to Spanish children, and asked Eleanor to participate in the campaign. Eleanor remained uncommitted, unsure if her attachment to such a cause would be acceptable to FDR. Wary of her own reputation, Strong worried about involving herself too much in the committee's organization because "I felt myself so obviously a 'left-wing' person that as soon as any other group could be got to go ahead, I should drop out of the picture, lest I narrow the appeal of the Joint Committee itself."<sup>197</sup> Strong, like Eleanor, was oftentimes a political liability because of her strong convictions. She knew when it was time to remove herself from a certain activity.

Strong also developed an interest in China, a country which she felt was being unfairly attacked by the Japanese. After a 1938 trip to China, which included meetings

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<sup>195</sup> ALS to ER, 13 January 1935, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> ALS to ER, 4 June 1937, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

with various Chinese leaders, she decided that America needed to do more to relieve this nation's plight. Hoping to sway ER to her side, she wrote her about the experience:

They [Chinese leaders] are rather perturbed that America is so indifferent for they think they are fighting America's war as well as their own. Most Americans out here [in China] also think so...China organized by herself, does not threaten our civilization, it enriches it; but a China organized by Japan would pull down the world. They know it, and they think America ought to know it.

From out here it looks as if America is the key to all possible international assistance to China, and that it is America who blocks the help that other nations are ready to give.<sup>198</sup>

Strong wanted Eleanor to understand the problem, putting herself at the First Lady's disposal if anything could be done. Unfortunately, the President could not be made to see that aid to China was yet politically feasible. A memo from FDR to ER asked her to "tell the lady that so far as the financing of China goes, the Government has no legal authority to do it?"<sup>199</sup> Eleanor relayed the wave-off, adding that "The feeling in this country is decidedly pro-Chinese, but not to the extent of going to war with Japan, and as long as we are not at war with Japan, there is nothing to do but remain neutral."<sup>200</sup> Not yet technically a belligerent, ER and the President knew it was unwise to involve the country in China any more than was absolutely essential. Eleanor ended her letter with a touch of remorse about the position she found herself in, confiding in Strong that "You are a most wonderful person in the way you get to all the trouble spots in the world. Unofficially, you can go, of course, and say whatever you choose, whereas those of us who are officials have not that privilege."<sup>201</sup> Eleanor may not have shared the same views as Strong, but she still envied a woman who could explore and travel with no restraints.

<sup>198</sup> ALS to ER, 6 February 1938, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>199</sup> FDR to ER, n.d., February 1938, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>200</sup> ER to ALS, 24 February 1938, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

In August of 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed their notorious nonaggression pact, an action which Anna Louise Strong applauded. Subsequently, Eleanor and Strong exchanged a flurry of correspondence. The day the pact was sealed, Strong wrote Eleanor with a take different from the majority of Americans: "I may be crazy but I'm betting that Hitler's next speech will be conciliatory,--that the pact has saved peace in Europe for the time being without sacrificing Poland."<sup>202</sup> She based this on her belief that "Stalin wants peace in Europe and acts for it intelligently in economic terms."<sup>203</sup> She explained further her personal analysis of Hitler's actions: that he did not want to be forced into war and that he only wanted "triumphs"—such as the pact with the Soviets—to give to the German people.<sup>204</sup> Strong also condemned England, stating that the Soviets acted "to make plain to the world the vast difference between Chamberlain's offer of 'military alliance' and their own 'mutual defense against aggression'..."<sup>205</sup> Strong predicted what was in store for Europe—most certainly NOT war—and she advised Eleanor that America should not side with the Allies, since it had "everything to gain from the Soviet-Nazi pact which has definitely hamstrung Japan, just as Chamberlain was getting ready an Eastern Munich."<sup>206</sup>

Eleanor considered everything Strong had written, and even forwarded her letter on to the President, without in any way agreeing with the points her friend brought forth. ER countered:

I have always felt that, in theory, Communism was closer to Democracy than Nazism. In spite of the realization that Stalin was a dictator...still one had the

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<sup>202</sup> ALS to ER, 24 August 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> ALS to ER, 25 August 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

hope that in the future the theory of Communism would make a world in which Democracy and Communism might live together.

This treaty does not seem to me to be in the interest of peace. It simply says to Hitler, "We will not attack you, so you are sure of having one less enemy. We need your machinery and you need our raw materials, and we are quite willing, for our mutual benefit, to have a trade agreement with you. As far as we are concerned you can go ahead and take possession of any of the other countries that you choose without our help."

...I will agree with you that it may tend to keep peace for the present, because it makes it somewhat difficult for anyone to stand up against Germany. But where do[es] Germany's attitude ever find a check and will we accept the Nazis now?<sup>207</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt, who had always been open to some communist tenets if they could be properly incorporated into democracy, was no longer so sure of those beliefs. Her open-mindedness was a faith under fire. She understood Strong's hostile attitude toward England, but was convinced that the British were still the better choice:

I am willing to concede that England has always been a selfish nation in her attitude toward other nations in her foreign policy, but most nations are selfish and, on the whole, we all enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom while England was mistress of the seas. I wonder if Germany would give us the same amount. She strikes me as being just as selfish and somewhat less supple.<sup>208</sup>

Eleanor told her friend that although she disagreed, she hoped that Strong's analysis was correct. Peace was always preferable to war. Ironically, the end of peace was a mere few days away.

On September 1<sup>st</sup>, Hitler invaded Poland. Just as ER had predicted, Germany's aims were not contained by the nonaggression pact—they were advanced. Strong remained enthusiastic, however, seizing on Eleanor's statement that she had once imagined Communism and Democracy co-existing in the future. She thought Stalin believed the same thing since he had the words "Socialism and Democracy are

<sup>207</sup> ER to ALS, 28 August 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

invincible” engraved on the Soviet Pavilion.<sup>209</sup> Strong did not think “the Soviets felt themselves to be walking out on the ‘democracies’ when they signed the Non-Aggression Pact.”<sup>210</sup> To supplement her belief that Communism and Democracy were still compatible, she used the example of her husband. Despite being a prominent Communist, he still loved FDR. According to Strong,

My husband, --supposedly a regular Bolshevik—goes wild with delighted excitement over the President’s speeches, and declares that “Just two countries, America and the Soviet Union, are the hope of the world”...It is the first time I ever heard him enthusiastic over anything outside socialism and the USSR...<sup>211</sup>

Strong’s husband certainly did not appreciate Democracy, yet he was fond of its current leader. Although FDR was a great democratic leader, he would not always be the President of the United States. Mr. Strong idolized one man rather than his country’s political ideals. Clearly, Strong’s appeal to her husband’s love of FDR was weak evidence to prove that Communism and Democracy could soon work hand in hand.

Eleanor spurned Strong’s optimism following the Hitler’s attack on Poland. To ER, Hitler and Stalin were plotting together and “In view of what has just happened, I think one has to accept the fact that Russia is under a dictator who is acting as all the other dictators in the world act.”<sup>212</sup> Eleanor also differed in her views on how events would unfold, regarding Stalin as perhaps no better than Hitler:

I feel like waiting to see what happens in Poland, what Russia’s future action will be in other countries, and her attitude toward Germany. Even if she could conclude a peace treaty with Great Britain and France, did she have to sign up with Germany just at the present time? It seems to me that it gave Hitler just the strength he needed to plunge Europe into this horrible war. Hitler might have

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<sup>209</sup> ALS to ER, 5 September 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> ER to ALS, 17 September 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

done it anyway, but one cannot help wondering if these two men might not believe in some of the same things.<sup>213</sup>

Just as she distrusted Hitler, ER could not condone the stories of Soviet atrocities pouring in from abroad. Even though she admitted a deficiency in her knowledge of Russia and Stalin, Eleanor had a sense of injustice about the mass killings she heard about. She lectured Strong, an ardent Stalinist:

I know that you now Mr. Stalin and I do not know him,...I cannot...quite bring myself to trust a man who, as part of a government, wipes out a people's religion, no matter how the church may have deserved correction, and it seems to me also that wholesale killings are hardly a help to civilization.<sup>214</sup>

Despite a lack of expertise, the First Lady rejected her friend's viewpoint.

Although her side had its own problems, Eleanor still stood for democracy and championed the allied cause, explaining to Strong: "I agree with you that the people of the world must control their governments, but I think Chamberlain, even with his efforts of appeasement which were futile, stands before the world a better figure than either Hitler or Stalin at the present moment."<sup>215</sup> As Strong criticized Chamberlain for his attempts at appeasement, Eleanor admitted that even their own country should take some blame:

As to Chamberlain and his group, perhaps they are more to blame than anybody else. I do not know that we [the United States] can go scot-free, because we shirked any responsibility toward the rest of the world and we want our debts paid. Hind sight is always better than fore sight. I am inclined to think, however, that I would rather have to deal with Mr. Chamberlain than with Mr. Hitler.<sup>216</sup>

<sup>213</sup> ER to ALS, 27 September 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> ER to ALS, 17 September 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>216</sup> ER to ALS, 27 September 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Although Chamberlain's means were unsuccessful, Eleanor found more validity in his ends. Chamberlain's goals were peace and democracy, ideals which ER always stood by. She felt similarly about the United States: they tried to keep peace and democracy alive, but in the end American neutrality inadvertently helped Hitler and Stalin's aims. Ultimately, Eleanor remained on the side of the allies.

Anna Louise Strong sided with Stalin, claiming that anything Russia did was simply in the interest of thwarting German dominance. She was the voice of the party-line. Strong professed that "If the USSR had not signed that Non-Aggression Pact and later marched into East Poland, I think we should have already had war across all Eastern Europe, with Hitler in the Baltic States and Balkans already, attacking the USSR."<sup>217</sup>

Strong painted a simplistic picture of heroic and self-sacrificing Russians who "set out themselves to stop that eastward march of Hitler, which they could only do by making a peace pact with him, thus marching to meet him, not as a foe but as a friend, and keep him from going too far."<sup>218</sup> To Strong, Eleanor's reports about Russia were inaccurate: freedom of religion was still guaranteed, the mass killings were not significant in light of what could have happened, and, preposterously, that under Stalin the Russian people did still control their own government.<sup>219</sup> As a conscientious friend, Eleanor read Strong's letter and the various newspaper clippings supporting her unorthodox viewpoint, without being persuaded. Although glad to have the information Strong provided, she also had other sources of news:

...there is a Polish officer who was taken prisoner in the part of Poland taken over by Russia, who escaped. He reports that every little land owner and every priest was shot by the Russian army. I realize that these things happen in war and

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<sup>217</sup> ALS to ER, 1 October 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

soldiers can not be controlled, but they do not make the picture as charming as you would seem to make it.<sup>220</sup>

Faithful to her beliefs, but not yet willing to categorically deny everything Strong advocated, Eleanor was confident that “time will show what is true and until then, we must all withhold our judgment.”<sup>221</sup> A wise Eleanor knew that nothing was certain in wartime.

In October, Anna Louise Strong was indicted by the Dies Committee for her radical comments about the war. Strong seemed to think that she could hold whatever views she wished in a democratic and free America. She sent a scathing telegram to Congressman Martin Dies, which she copied to Eleanor:

Categorically deny Sing Sing convict Malkin's accusation against my Americanism and hold you personally responsible for knowingly framing and publicizing barefaced lies by confessed criminals against decent Americans of three hundred years standing. Today's worst danger to our American Democracy is your scandalmongering committee which organizes stoolpigeons and criminals to smear all prominent American progressives in order to prepare unrestrained dictatorship of your plutocratic bosses.<sup>222</sup>

Although unsatisfied with the way the Dies Committee did business, Eleanor most likely thought Strong's remarks were too brutal and categorically negative. Just as she told the American Youth Congress that same year, it was not politically savvy to criticize all facets of the Dies Committee, since some of its work was applauded by a large percentage of the people. Eleanor also understood that not all Communists were from the same mold. The most ardent and subversive communists were the ones creating all the trouble. She explained to Strong:

The thing which is doing Russia the most harm in this country, no matter how much we all of us dislike the Dies Committee, is the fact that Earl Browder

<sup>220</sup> ER to ALS, 17 October 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> ALS to Martin Dies, 16 October 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

and various other American communists, are discovered not to have been acting as free agents but as directed ones. This is bad for good relationships between Russia and ourselves as the tie up with Germany is bad for our relationship with them.<sup>223</sup>

ER simply could not “feel completely comfortable when people frankly admit having done certain things in this country at the direction of the government in Moscow.”<sup>224</sup>

Such people gave Communists a very bad name in America, and Strong had to realize that people found it difficult to differentiate between independent-minded Communists and Communist puppets.

By December Strong had gone too far—from criticizing the Dies Committee to showing a great contempt for the State Department. Thinking that she might be able to help the President and clear up misunderstandings, she again wrote the First Lady: “I fear I don’t entirely trust the permanent staff of our State department,”<sup>225</sup> elaborating that

A member of the Soviet Embassy staff recently told me: “Mr. Hull is an honest man, but the permanent staff keeps the facts from getting to him.” I fear there are people in that department who would like to involve us in war with the USSR. I am glad to note by the press the indications that the President intends to be careful; I hope he will be doubly so.<sup>226</sup>

Even though Strong only wanted to pass on what she hoped to be useful information, the President felt she was stepping over the line. After his wife passed on the letter to him, he fired back an indignant memo to ER:

You might tell Anna Louise Strong that the report given her that Ambassador Bowers could not get reports and letters through to me is the kind of rot that she ought not to believe—and that Bowers’ frequent longhand letters to me came straight through to me with the seals unbroken. She might just as well get it into her head that the Secretary of State and the President know a great deal more about conditions than she has any idea of.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>223</sup> ER to ALS, 25 October 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> ALS to ER, 5 December 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> FDR to ER, 10 December 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Eleanor tried to soften her husband's words and passed them on to Strong, adding, "it is foolish to think either of them [the President and the Secretary of State] are being fooled by any country at the present time."<sup>228</sup> Strong needed to take care about whom she criticized. Perhaps her close relationship with the First Lady led her to feel immune to attack.

Anna Louise Strong discerned a change in Eleanor Roosevelt during 1939 and 1940. She thought it a mistake that ER revised her views on Communists, writing ER that "your last column seems to put 'Communists, Communist fronts, and Communist transmission belts' in a different category from 'perfectly innocent people'."<sup>229</sup> Strong inquired: "Do you really consider that Communists are 'foreign agents'?...Don't you think that before publicly declaring them 'foreign agents' you owe them the right you yourself asked for everyone—to be confronted with the evidence?"<sup>230</sup> Eleanor's answer established that she no longer saw Communism as a black and white issue—the gray areas were prevalent. She explained her new attitude to Strong:

I did not exclude American communists from their rights under the Bill of Rights....

Communists who are Americans and who are willing to operate under our laws have to learn that there is a fundamental difference between democracy and communism. They may not say so in their constitution and by-laws, but they know that there is because we clearly recognize the right of personal property and communism does not. If they are American citizens, they must be willing to abide by our democratic form of government, agreeing that in an orderly fashion, as we amend all of our laws, we will some day have to amend our constitution if it becomes an accepted desire of the American people to do so. They are only foreign agents if they do not accept this method of work, and if they work according to directions from another country...<sup>231</sup>

<sup>228</sup> ER to ALS, 13 December 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>229</sup> ALS to ER, 18 December 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> ER to ALS, 29 December 1939, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

Eleanor hoped that Strong understood *exactly* what the difference was between these two brands of Communists. Her letter privately told Strong how to differentiate, but she wanted to let the public know as well. She also promised to “try to say more clearly what I believe at all times. I seem to have done it very poorly of late.”<sup>232</sup>

By 1941, both Eleanor and Strong had grown resolute in their convictions about war, Europe, and Communism. Unfortunately, the stronger their views became, the more divergent their ideals. When Strong insinuated that America had no regard for communists in China, Eleanor flippantly replied: “I do not think any one in this country has the slightest desire to ‘kill’ the communists in China, nor do I think that it is any of our business.”<sup>233</sup> Eleanor believed that China should worry about China and the United States, in turn, would worry about the United States.<sup>234</sup> In a long letter to Strong, Eleanor expanded on her own beliefs. Regarding Strong’s findings that all the statesman and diplomats she met in Europe and Asia thought Russia’s non-aggression pact with Germany was “a shrewd act of self-preservation from a war,” Eleanor responded: “I imagine you are entirely right and that it was a shrewd move on their part, but because a thing is shrewd, it does not make it right.”<sup>235</sup> She expanded her indictment of Russia:

If Russia really believes in freedom of the people and peace, she certainly would not align herself with the power in Europe which for a long time had been curtailing the freedoms of its people, as well as oppressing cruelly the people of another race.

You may tell me that it is just what everybody else would do in self-preservation, but many of us thought that Russia would not do the things which everybody else would do. We found rather to our disappointment that she did and that Stalin is a dictator in exactly the same way as Hitler and Mussolini are dictators.

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> ER to ALS, 17 February 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

The Russians have a right to any form of government they choose to have. I am not critical of what they have but I do not want their influence or their form of government for my own country because I feel we have more chance for freedom.<sup>236</sup>

With these volleys, Eleanor effectively ended her dialogue with Strong. After this, the flow of their correspondence about the European crisis slows to a trickle, except for a few minor matters.

In June of 1941, Strong telegraphed ER urging her to have the United States send all possible aid to Russian resistance to halt Hitlerism.<sup>237</sup> A confused Eleanor wrote back: "It seems a little odd to ask that we give all possible material aid to Russia at this point."<sup>238</sup> ER's thoughts were understandable given America's neutral position at the time, but the response "pained and shocked" Anna Louise Strong.<sup>239</sup> She could not grasp how the First Lady, "with your great heart for mankind, should be so callous towards those millions of Russian boys."<sup>240</sup> She also could not understand why Eleanor believed that "Stalin made Russia Hitler's ally."<sup>241</sup> Strong's emotions seemed to have gotten out of hand, and Eleanor replied accordingly: "You seem to ignore the fact that it was when Russia signed the non-aggression pact and the economic treaty with Germany, that Germany and Russia together, went in and took over Poland, and the war started."<sup>242</sup> ER reminded Strong that "people are represented by their governments...and the Russian government under Stalin made a pact with the Nazi government under Hitler."<sup>243</sup> The First Lady *was* indeed concerned about the young Russians "making a gallant fight", but

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> ALS to ER, 23 June 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>238</sup> ER to ALS, 3 July 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>239</sup> ALS to ER, 21 July 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> ER to ALS, 24 July 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

she did not “see that there is much one can do about it just at present.”<sup>244</sup> To show no hard feelings and that a reliable picture was not easy to discern, she ended: “The world has gone mad, and we can only hope that some day it will regain some kind of sanity.”<sup>245</sup>

Anna Louise Strong did understand this last statement. Although she did not abandon her Stalinist faith, she was willing to accept that she and her friend would have to differ. She thanked Eleanor for her perspective “because it gave so clearly the questions which have prevented the American people from feeling whole-hearted friendship for the Soviets.”<sup>246</sup> Now that she knew the arguments, Strong felt better able to fight the pro-Soviet battle.

In an attempt at reconciliation, Strong told Eleanor:

Since you found my answers unsatisfactory, I think that means the American people do. I always think you express the voice of the American people, more than anyone I know...some people will tell you that you are more progressive than the American average; don't believe them. You may know and express more, but the bulk of the American people are more progressive, even as you. This lies not behind not only your husband's repeated election, but also your own success as a columnist<sup>247</sup>

This statement is very revealing, especially coming from an avid Communist. Strong felt that the majority of the American people were just as progressive as Eleanor—they followed her lead. Although many Americans loved and trusted Eleanor Roosevelt, others regarded her as out of place and frequently acting out of turn.<sup>248</sup> The anti-Eleanor camp never wanted to accept that she “express[ed] the voice of the American people,” especially at the turn of a decade when ER was labeled a “communist” and a “socialist” on a regular basis. Her critics did not understand the First Lady in the way this friend

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> ALS to ER, 6 August 1941, reel 18, in *Papers of ER, 1933-1945*.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> See Gallup Poll on 9 December 1942 in Gallup, 356-57 and footnotes 188-189.

did. Anna Louise Strong, though a radical herself, knew authoritatively about Eleanor's political creed on Russia, Germany, Communism, and Socialism. While many judged that Eleanor and her friend were like-minded, it is ironic that Strong judged the First Lady as "the voice" of the American people—a voice that contradicted her own rock-ribbed radical faith.

### Conclusion

Eleanor Roosevelt had a distinctive relationship with her Presidential husband. They often related through memos, meetings, and go-betweens rather than through face-to-face contact. As strange as this was for a married couple, this was the way the Roosevelts operated. The country appears to have benefited from it, as the Roosevelts mitigated the Depression and helped win a World War.

As seen through her correspondence, Eleanor's work was always done with FDR in the back of her mind. Although she pushed and prodded him at times, she never asked for more than he could give. Eleanor realized his limits both as a President and as a man, and she conducted herself accordingly. In her autobiography she tellingly described her own feelings about her relationship with her husband:

He might have been happier with a wife who was completely uncritical. That I was never able to be, and he had to find it in other people. Nevertheless, I think I sometimes acted as a spur, even though the spurring was not always wanted or welcome. I was one of those who served his purposes.<sup>249</sup>

Eleanor may have given him headaches, but FDR would probably never have fully accomplished what he did without the other part of his Team.

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<sup>249</sup> Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 349.

Eleanor was a First Lady unlike any before her. Active and independent, she pursued causes that she felt needed backing. Disregarding the accepted social etiquette of a political wife, ER blazed her own way. Sometimes she was hailed; other times deeply criticized. If she was just "another liberal," her controversial actions could have been dismissed as annoying and unimportant, but she happened to be married to the President of the United States. Everything Eleanor Roosevelt did was scrutinized to the utmost degree. Her letters document the care with which she chose her alliances and pursued her activities. She never made rash decisions, always taking the time to get to know someone or understand a cause before she became involved. Occasionally, she slipped up or got in too deep, which is not surprising as she was known to be just like "a regular person." Her humanity got both her and her husband in trouble, but her kind heart also gained The Roosevelt Team immense popularity and support. Despite her involvement in controversial issues, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as an immensely important historical figure and a profound political asset to the President.

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