

Eleanor Roosevelt and Civil Rights

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Eleanor Roosevelt's support of African American rights was one of the highlights of her activities as first lady. Her fearless advocacy for justice pulled her into political controversies that were unprecedented for the wife of a president. The first lady's initiatives in support of the rights of African Americans offer students an excellent window into the society and politics of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.



Eleanor Roosevelt visits Lucy D. Slowe Hall, a women's dormitory for African American war workers, in Washington, D.C., 1943

(Photographer: Roger Smith; Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Eleanor Roosevelt was passionately committed to the ideals of social justice. She viewed racial discrimination as a blatant form of injustice that had been tolerated for too long. She actively cultivated relationships with civil rights leaders, and was at the center of major events in civil rights history, among them the controversy that arose in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall. Through her activism, she hoped to rally public opinion in favor of civil rights. As first lady, she also knew that she was uniquely

situated to have the ear of the president, and she was fully prepared to use this access to promote a cause in which she believed.

The Political Context of Eleanor Roosevelt's Initiatives

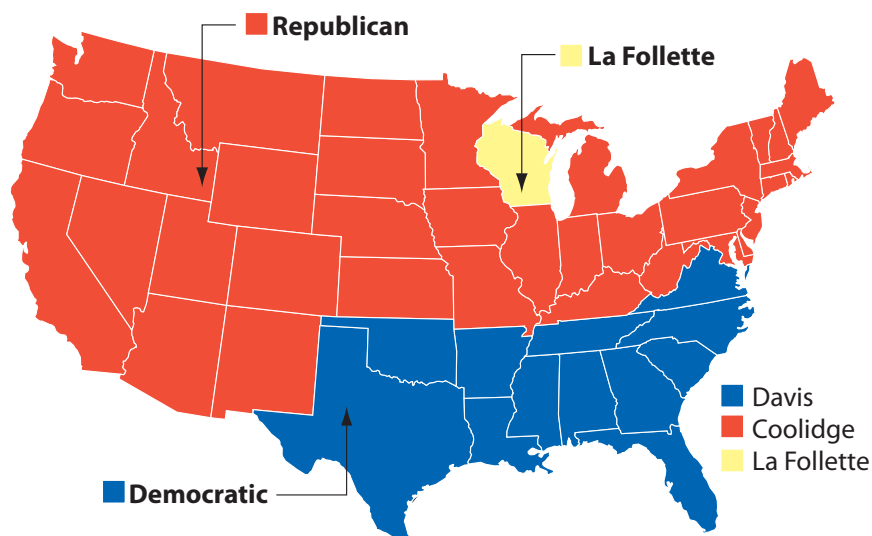
The period between Reconstruction and the New Deal was one of great frustration for the African American community. It was an economically depressed community with high rates of poverty, low access to a good education, and subject to discrimination in all aspects of life. In the South, the community bore the brunt

of the Jim Crow laws that established a relentless regime of segregation, and had encouraged extensive migration to the more economically developed northern states. The failure of Reconstruction left African Americans in the South widely deprived of the right to vote as a result of poll tax regulations or "literacy tests," and subject to violence if they organized political protests.

Since the Civil War, African American voters had traditionally supported the Republican Party as a result of its abolition of slavery; yet as the Roosevelt era began, the Republicans were closely identified with business interests and seemed little concerned with the poorer segments of the population, in which African Americans were disproportionately represented. Meanwhile, the core basis of the Democratic Party's support was the South, as can be seen in the map on the next page, which presents the distribution of electoral votes in the 1924 election, the closest presidential contest between the end of World War I and Roosevelt's victory in 1932. Even though the Democrats were increasingly interested in putting together the alliance of workers and ethnic and religious minorities that later became the core of the Democratic Party coalition, and included most African Americans, the leaders of the Party in the 1930s were unwilling to alienate the strong segregationist bloc of southern Democrats in Congress.

In the early years of the Roosevelt era, the difficulty of promoting civil

U.S. presidential election 1924



rights through Congress became painfully clear. The first lady believed in the advancement of African American rights as a vital social and moral issue; yet to her chagrin, it was impossible even to pass an anti-lynching law through Congress. More than 3,000 blacks had been lynched since the Civil War, and it was extremely rare for any perpetrator of a lynching to be arrested and convicted.¹ The frequency of mob killings increased in the first year of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. Lynchings were not limited to the segregated South, but had spread to states like Maryland and California. In one of his first public statements via a national radio broadcast, FDR condemned lynching as murder. Despite an initial commitment by the president to anti-lynching legislation, when the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill was submitted to Congress, he reversed course and decided to pursue a "southern strategy" to keep peace with the white supremacists in Congress who, with each effort to introduce favorable laws for African Americans, threatened to vote against any of the president's bills which were designed to keep the nation from economic collapse during the Great Depression. The fear of the Southern veto continued throughout the later years of the Roosevelt presidency as the urgent need to combat the Depression was followed by the need to

maintain national unity during World War II. Despite the fact that the Roosevelt presidency marked the period during which African Americans changed their allegiance to the Democratic Party, it did not produce any significant civil rights legislation.

The winds of change that gave African Americans hope during the Roosevelt Administration emanated from actions taken in the executive branch of government, where the president had the power to take action on his own initiative without recourse to Congress. Here, the influence of Eleanor Roosevelt on her husband and senior administration officials was formidable. The first lady accomplished one of her major goals when the president signed executive orders that barred discrimination against African Americans in New Deal Programs during the Great Depression—a vital concern for the African American community, in which widespread poverty existed, and the impact of the Great Depression was especially devastating. At Eleanor Roosevelt's urging, FDR also established the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, an advisory group of distinguished African Americans, sometimes known as the "Black Cabinet," who made recommendations to the president on policies that would improve the situation of African Americans. Partly as a result of its influence, the Roosevelt

Administration was characterized by a well-publicized series of appointments of leading African Americans to high government positions. In the presidential election of 1936, for the first time since the Civil War, the African American vote went predominantly to the Democratic Party, as African Americans responded to the accomplishments and promise of the New Deal, and the initiatives taken to reduce discrimination in federal government programs.

The Appeal to Public Opinion

Faced by the obstacles in Congress to civil rights legislation, Eleanor Roosevelt concluded that it was important to rally public opinion to the cause. A very significant part of her contribution to the cause of African American rights lay in her use of the first lady's role to highlight the injustice of racial discrimination and the problems it caused, and also to promote public recognition of African American organizations and leaders who worked to improve the lot of their community. Both Roosevelts were fully aware of the new opportunities presented by the development of the media for the White House to reach the American public. Franklin Roosevelt's fireside radio chats were the most heralded example, but Eleanor Roosevelt was also fully conscious of the importance of winning public opinion, and her ability to influence it. One commentator noted that "Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as the most influential woman of her day largely because she was able to utilize the media both to advance the causes in which she was interested and to realize her own potential."² Her counterpart to FDR's fireside chats was her syndicated column titled "My Day," which began in 1936, and was published in newspapers across the country. Her vocal opposition to racial discrimination gave the cause a vital move forward in the theater of public opinion.

The first lady took many public actions that were powerful symbols of her support for civil rights. Although

the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill was doomed to fail in Congress, she continued to publicly support it through her activities as first lady—for example, by being very visibly present at an art exhibit hosted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1935 entitled “A Commentary on Lynching” that focused on the suffering of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. At other public events, she gave clear and enthusiastic support for the ideals of civil rights. Participating in a fund-raiser for the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, in Harlem’s Mother AME Zion Church in the late 1930s, she proclaimed: “We should all have equal rights, and minorities should certainly have them exactly as majorities do.”³ Eleanor Roosevelt called for the integration of Southern hospitals and professional schools. She took a special interest in the education of black children, demanding that funding for segregated black schools be equal to the funding provided to white schools.

Always mindful of the benefits of being visible to public opinion, Eleanor Roosevelt sought to raise the profile of African American leaders by meeting and publicly befriending some of the most distinguished members of the community. As first lady, she repeatedly held White House receptions for black leaders and representatives of African American organizations. Among the African American leaders for whom she had special respect were Mary McLeod Bethune, the educator and founder of the National Council of Negro Women, and Walter White, executive director of the NAACP. The first lady delivered the keynote address in 1937 at the Conference on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth organized by Bethune. According to Bethune, the first lady’s presence was the first time in the lengthy struggle of African American citizens for equality that the federal government had demonstrated such interest in their plight.⁴ The first lady also helped initiate and integrate the call for a Second Reconstruction ignited

by the 1938 Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, where she defied segregation laws against sitting with African Americans. She and Bethune provided a powerful national image of interracial cooperation. Their joint appearances were revolutionary in the 1930s when virtually no Caucasian political leader collaborated with African American leaders.

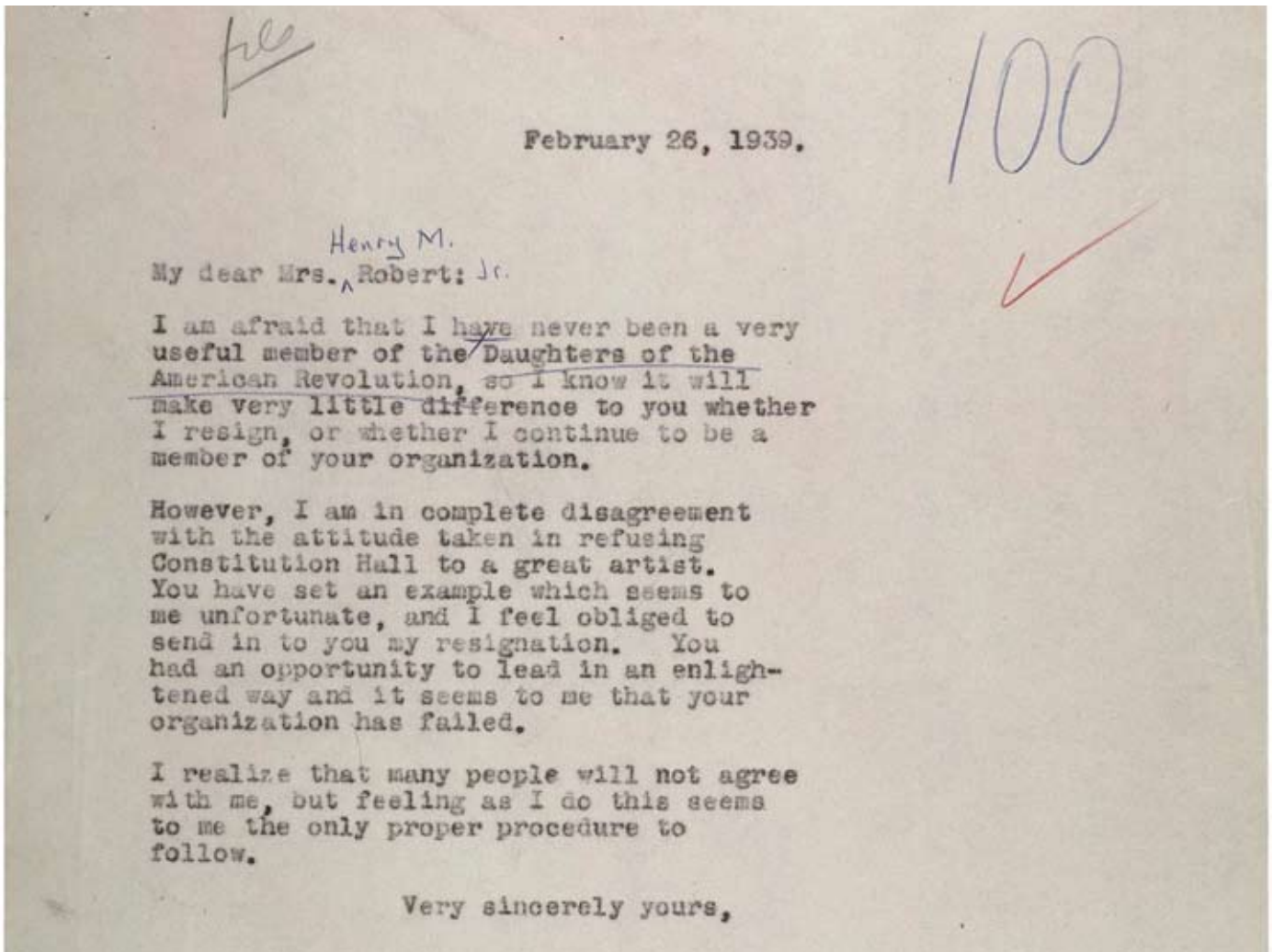
One distinguished African American whom Eleanor Roosevelt admired was Marian Anderson, whose extraordinary contralto voice made her one of the most celebrated singers of the time, and who had performed at the White House by invitation of the Roosevelts. When the NAACP awarded Marian Anderson its prestigious Spingarn Medal, Eleanor Roosevelt invited the renowned singer to perform in Washington’s Constitution Hall, which was a venue owned and operated by the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization of descendants of participants in the Revolution. Embarrassingly, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to rent out the hall for that purpose, because the organization adhered to a segregationist policy prohibiting African Americans from performing in the Hall.

Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, resigned from the organization amid great publicity. The document on page 248 presents her letter of resignation. She explained her reasons to the American people in newspapers distributed throughout the country, through her widely syndicated *My Day* column of February 27, 1939. After stating that she had weighed the possibility of working for change within the Daughters of the American Revolution, she had concluded that she would not be able to do sufficient active work inside the organization. “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.”⁵

The outcome of the controversy over Marian Anderson’s performance was that the Roosevelt Administration invited Marian Anderson to give a concert on government property at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 1939. The event was attended by a large multi-racial crowd of about 75,000 people and broadcast to millions of Americans by radio. The high quality of Marian Anderson’s singing was greeted by tumultuous applause by the attendees, and received critical acclaim in newspaper reviews. Later that year, Eleanor Roosevelt presented the Spingarn Medal to Marian Anderson in a much-publicized ceremony in Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War, when the NAACP held its National Convention there in July.

One effect of the controversy was that it revealed the increasing opposition of many white Americans to segregationist policies. A petition objecting to the decision of the Daughters of the American Revolution was signed by Chief Justice Charles Evan Hughes and his wife; Supreme Court Associate Justice Hugo Black (formerly a Senator for Alabama) and his wife; New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia; and a number of senators.⁶ A *New York Times* editorial accused the Daughters of the American Revolution of departing from the ideals of that Revolution, and stated that “It is hard to believe that any patriotic organization in this country would approve of discrimination against so gifted an artist and so fine a person as Miss Anderson. In fact, no organization could do so and still merit the adjective patriotic.”⁷ Public opinion polls were still relatively new, but the Gallup organization, which had been gaining a strong reputation for reliability, found that 67 percent of the U.S. public supported Mrs. Roosevelt’s stand on the issue.⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt’s public stand on behalf of Marian Anderson suddenly made hopes for ending racial discrimination seem realistic.

Eleanor Roosevelt continued to take a stand for civil rights in the period leading up to World War II and during the war



Eleanor Roosevelt's letter of resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What was Eleanor Roosevelt's purpose in writing this letter?

Why did an invitation to Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall create a controversy?

Who supported Eleanor Roosevelt's position?

Who supported the position of the Daughters of the American Revolution?

What was the outcome of the dispute?

What impact did the controversy have on African Americans?

itself, as the role that African Americans would play in the war effort brought the issue of civil rights to the fore. Ignoring growing antagonism by Southerners, Eleanor Roosevelt equated American racism with fascism, proclaiming that "America could not fight racism abroad while tolerating it at home."⁹ She investigated claims of harsh treatment and blatant discrimination in the barracks of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and Tuskegee Airmen training programs. In 1941, she visited the Tuskegee Air Field insisting to take a ride with African American pilot Charles Anderson. She

was willing to take a strong stand against discrimination, even in wartime, and one of her most influential essays, published in 1943, was titled "Abolish Jim Crow," and called for the establishment of four simple equalities between the races: equality before the law, equality of education, equality in the economic field, and equality of expression.¹⁰

Despite her personal commitment to ending discrimination, Eleanor Roosevelt was still willing to broker agreements between the president and civil rights leaders that gave those leaders less than they sought. When Walter

White and A. Philip Randolph threatened to march on Washington if the president did not desegregate defense industries and armed forces, the first lady intervened. Appealing to civil rights leaders not to march, she persuaded the reluctant president to agree to issue an executive order banning discrimination in federally-funded defense industry programs and establish the Fair Employment Practices Committee to monitor compliance. The segregation of the armed forces, however, was allowed to continue. Although the integration of the armed forces was only implemented

by Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt's strong opposition to discrimination played an important role in moving the issue forward to the point where integration would be possible.

The Impact on Democratic Politics

By articulating the cause of civil rights, Eleanor Roosevelt helped to bring about a dramatic change in the voting patterns of African Americans, who had traditionally voted Republican. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies appealed to African Americans, who had been especially hard hit by the Depression, by offering the hope for economic survival in the present and economic improvement later on. It would be wrong, however, to attribute the African American move into the Democratic Party as simply driven by economic reasons. Eleanor Roosevelt rallied African Americans by her clear belief that civil rights was a moral cause, and that social justice required the improvement of African American conditions and the introduction of equality of rights. Roy Wilkins, who led the NAACP from 1955 to 1977 contrasted Eleanor with her husband, saying that President Roosevelt was:

A friend of Negroes only insofar as he refused to exclude the Negro from his general policies that applied to the whole country, whereas Mrs. Roosevelt was the Negro's true friend. The personal touches and the personal fight against discrimination were Mrs. Roosevelt's. That attached to Roosevelt also—he couldn't get away from it—and he reaped the political benefits from it.¹¹

Eleanor Roosevelt's advocacy of rights for African Americans gave the cause a vital move forward in the theater of public opinion and helped to bring closer the eventual enactment of

civil rights legislation. By encouraging African Americans to move their support to the Democratic Party, it also played a role in a long-term cycle that transformed American party politics, in which the Democratic Party moved north to create a new political coalition, and the Republican Party eventually moved south. 🗳

Notes

1. This information was obtained from estimates provided in the Tuskegee University Archives Online Repository, accessed at <http://192.203.127.197/archive/bitstream/handle/123456789/511/Lyching%201882%201968.pdf?sequence=1>
2. Maurine H. Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 2.
3. Roy Wilkins and Tom Matthews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 130.
4. Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), 51.
5. Rochelle Chadakoff, ed., *Eleanor Roosevelt's My Day: Her Acclaimed Columns, 1936–1945* (New York: Pharos, 1989), 113.
6. James R. Kearney, *Anna Eleanor Roosevelt: The Evolution of a Reformer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 88.
7. Ibid.
8. Chadakoff, op. cit., 113.
9. Doris K. Goodwin, "Eleanor Roosevelt," *Time* (April 13, 1998): 4.
10. The essay was written for the August 1943 issue of *New Threshold*. See Allida M. Black, ed., *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essential Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1995): 161–163.
11. Quoted by Tamarak K. Hareven, "Eleanor Roosevelt: Humanitarian Reformer," in Jess Flemlin and Colleen M. O'Connor, eds., *Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Journey* (San Diego, Calif.: San Diego State University Press, 1987): 165.

Source of document: National Archives. The document can be accessed at:

www.archives.gov/global-pages/larger-image.html?i=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/eleanor-roosevelt-letter-dar-l.jpg&c=/historical-docs/doc-content/images/eleanor-roosevelt-letter-dar.caption.html

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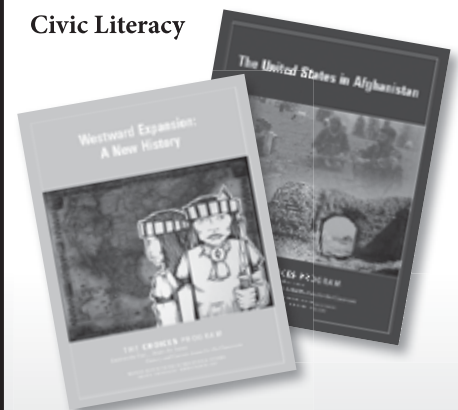
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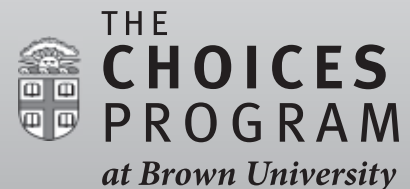
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