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Eleanor Roosevelt:

How She Redefined and Revolutionized the Position of First Lady

By

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The role of First Lady has been a position held by many different women throughout the history of the United States, and one that has fluctuated in importance and stature. While it is not an elected position it is one that has had expectations, and grown in definition. While each First Lady has contributed their own mark on the White House, none have been as influential and impactful in changing the role and within the role as Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor used this position to not only be a partner and supporter of the president, but also to gain her own power in order to further her political and activist goals. While First Ladies before Eleanor were spoken about it was often in conjuncture of their role as hostess and supporter of their husbands. Martha Washington the very first First Lady was known for her amiable hosting abilities for presidential guests and affairs, and Dolley Madison was more notable for her extremely glamorous and elegant events, making the presidency seem more sophisticated and powerful. These First Ladies helped to create the precedent, before Eleanor, to be good hostesses and trend setters.¹ Most other First Ladies before the twentieth century followed this example, though more quietly behind the scenes, Edith Kermit Roosevelt, President Theodore Roosevelt's second wife to fulfill the role was even quoted to say, "A lady's name should appear in print only three times at her birth, marriage, and death."² However, Eleanor Roosevelt took a completely different approach to her time as First Lady. Eleanor did not shirk from media and attention, and even used those mediums to her benefit. Using the attention that being the president's wife afforded her Eleanor grabbed the attention of the nation and used it to put light on issues she had personal and political interest in. By not fulfilling traditional expectations of former First Ladies, Eleanor created a new way to be First Lady, one that held power in its own right separate from the president. Eleanor

¹ Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Wives*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

² Sylvia Jukes Morris, *Edith Kermit Roosevelt: Portrait of a First Lady* (New York, 1980), 525-26.

redefined the role of First Lady by giving it relevance and space by not only helping to complete FDR's agenda but by completing her own agenda through her activism for minority groups, her use of media, and her widespread travel. Eleanor Roosevelt was able to make herself an essential political figure of the twentieth century as well as leave a legacy attached to the position of First Lady for future women fulfilling the role to follow.

The First Lady position's rise in media coverage was not only used by Eleanor as a tool, but it also brought about a lot of critics as well, that would also follow future First Ladies. With the rise of the use of media and communication being more widespread throughout the United States and the world, the ability for First Ladies to remain out of the media seemed to no longer be a possibility.³ With the rise of media the actions of first ladies became more easily tracked and spread, even Eleanor's major travel would bring attention to former first ladies with a New York Times article in 1937 stating, "Prior to the accession of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt as chatelaine of the White House, reticence concerning all the comings, going and doings of the wife of the President was an unchallenged tradition, the influence of which extends even today to the lives of her predecessors."⁴ The article would go on to express what living former First

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- 3 Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*. Rev. and Updated ed, Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁴ "First Ladies of Other Years are Still Ruled by Reticence: Ex-Mistresses of the White House Remain Active, but Prefer to Stay Out of the Public Eye all are Fond of Travel A Sewing Enthusiast Three Not on Pension List A Sewing Enthusiast Active with Girl Scouts She Shops Frequently Dislikes Public Speaking WIVES OF FORMER PRESIDENTS ABSORBED IN FAMILIES, POLITICS AND ART," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Feb 07, 1937. <https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/historical-newspapers/first-ladies-other-years-are-still-ruled/docview/102057885/se-2?accountid=14703>

Ladies were up to in terms of travel and work outside of their husbands, a scrutiny that they had not needed to necessarily face or factor in their lives before. First Ladies after Eleanor would face criticism as well, especially in regard to how they dress rather than their political and activist work, as Eleanor was. Eleanor was a threat to the established idea that a woman should stay in the home and be just a wife and a mother and because of that she did not fit the ideal image of what a woman and first lady should be. Her critics would use this as a way to attack her character and views, Eleanor Roosevelt biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook writes, “there are those who focus on her teeth and voice and other cartoon characteristics, long before they reveal how much they despise her politics.”⁵ This obsession with what the first lady wears and looks like has continued onto future first ladies, similarly Michele Obama has faced criticism saying that she weighs too much to be able to advocate to fight childhood obesity, commenting more on her appearance than what her actual work and activism.⁶ Or Hilary Clinton who was criticized for being too independent of her husband as a career woman, especially for wearing pantsuits, saying that she was not allowing her husband to call the shots and be a strong politician.⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt faced these first challenges of fitting her status as a woman and First Lady with that of a politician and activist. By gaining power for the role of First Lady and gaining attention she also brought around this practice of scrutiny from the public and press upon the role.

⁵ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Vol. 1–3. 3 vols. New York: Viking, 1992.

⁶ Mikki Kendall, “22 Times Michelle Obama Endured Rude, Racist, Sexist or Plain Ridiculous Attacks,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 1, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/16/22-times-michelle-obama-endured-rude-racist-sexist-or-plain-dumb-attacks/>.

⁷ Fiona Sinclair Scott, “The Weaponization of a First Lady’s Image,” *CNN* (Cable News Network, October 16, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/the-weaponization-of-a-first-ladys-image/index.html>.

Eleanor however, had not always been a political powerhouse trying to push the boundaries of societal expectations for women in power, she was born into an upper-class New York society that bred her to become a traditional wife and mother. Roosevelt was born on October 11th 1884 to elite New Yorkers Anna Hall and Elliot Roosevelt. She was not considered very attractive, much to the disappointment of her mother who expected her to grow up within the elite society of New York and follow the societal sanctions around them. Unfortunately, both of Eleanor's parents died by the time she was nine and she was sent to live with her maternal grandmother who was also very harsh on Eleanor's appearance and attitude. She subsequently sent Eleanor to London at the age of 15 to study at a finishing school run by Marie Souvestre. Mlle. Souvestre saw potential in Eleanor and made her a traveling companion, taking her around the world and showing her different lives and socio-economic realities.⁸ Mlle. Souvestre was a woman with progressive views that she passed on to Eleanor, giving an insight into how Eleanor's liberal views began. Eleanor remained there until she returned to the United States at the age of 18 in 1902 in order to "come out" to society. It was around this time that she re-met Franklin Delano Roosevelt.⁹ After courting for a bit, FDR proposed and though it took her a while to answer his proposal ultimately, she accepted. FDR's mother, however, did not approve of Eleanor at the time because she was working at a settlement house and teaching classes to young people in the slums under the help of the Justice League. This did not fit into FDR's mother's view of what an elite woman should be doing. Even with the objection, FDR and Eleanor were married on March 17, 1905. FDR's mother's objections prove to be an interesting one as with many First Ladies before her, it is seen that within this match FDR is marrying up.

⁸ Boller, *Presidential Wives*, 286.

⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

Not only was Eleanor from an elite wealthy family, and educated. She was also the favorite niece of former president Theodore Roosevelt, who even walked her down the aisle.¹⁰ Soon after their wedding FDR and Eleanor moved in with his mother and Eleanor lost most of the autonomy that she had earned for herself through her various jobs. She gave up her job at the settlement house and had six children in the span of ten years, as she was expected to become a mother and housewife.¹¹ Living with her mother in law Sara Roosevelt, was a stretch in time in which Eleanor felt she lost any sort of independence or identity outside of a mother, and even that she felt was restricted by Sara and the nannies that took care of her children. When trying to commit to the expected gendered ideologies where she remained at home, she was kept from being able to fulfill those roles as mother and housewife by her mother in law, and therefore felt she really had no purpose in life. Because of this feeling of little personal autonomy or actions, Eleanor when given a chance to help FDR with political issues, she focused on fighting for her own power and for women's rights, allowing other women to be able to leave a place where they lacked autonomy. With all of this in mind it is interesting that Eleanor Roosevelt did not consider herself to be an activist nor even a suffragist before her husband's political involvement.

Roosevelt had no interest in politics and did not often involve herself in her husband's beginnings in running for New York State Senate in 1910. It was then that FDR came out in support for women's suffrage that Eleanor herself did not believe. In fact, in her autobiography she remembers at the time that she thought "that men were superior creatures, and... knew more about politics than women."¹² This significant contrast to the activism and feminist Eleanor Roosevelt is to become shows how much she took advantage of her access to her husband's

¹⁰ Boller, *Presidential Wives*.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 287.

¹² Eleanor Roosevelt, *This Is My Story* (New York, 1937),17-18.

political career and advisors. It was not until FDR's main advisor Louis Howe began teaching her about politics that she began to realize the power she could have within a larger context than elite housewife and politician's wife. Eleanor used her position as First Lady to gain answers and information as her political inquiry grew. This was amplified when FDR contracted polio. Though FDR's mother wanted him to quit politics and remain at home, it was at the urging of Eleanor that he continued on with his political career, and because of this he needed to rely on her ability to walk and travel far more than he could. Louis Howe saw the potential that Eleanor had and immediately began to put her to work. She joined the Women's division of the Democratic State Committee of New York and began to discuss with people the benefits of the democratic party. She even wrote an article "Why I Am a Democrat" which the public viewed as her speaking out not only for herself but for her husband as well.¹³ Her views in clear terms expressed that she believed that the democratic party and what her husband stood for was the welfare of the common people and the interest of the people within the United States. These views she backed up in how she created platforms for minorities and bringing attention to causes that may not have gotten the high media attention without her help.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a large advocated for the African American community in how she pushed for equality within work forces and her support of desegregating the military, as well as her strong backing of the Anti-Lynching Bill. Eleanor and Franklin were the first President and First Lady in the White House to have black civil rights leaders and guest regularly visit and perform in the White House.¹⁴ Eleanor would often pose in pictures with these leaders and would spread on media her support and love of black artist, giving them a larger platform and further

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ Allida M. Black, "Championing a Champion: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Marian Anderson "Freedom Concert"." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): p. 2.

showing her support and adding prestige to the work against racial discrimination. Though one great way and probably the most publicized things that Eleanor Roosevelt did to back her activism and ally ship of African Americans searching for civil rights was her support and backing of famous African American opera singer Marian Anderson in 1939. Marian Anderson would sing every year in Washington, D.C. as a benefit concert to the Howard University School of Music. In 1939 Howard University had wanted the concert to be held in the Daughters of the American Revolution's (DAR) auditorium that could hold 400,000 people as an audience, one of the largest halls in Washington, D.C. However, the DAR was an all-white association, as Washington D.C. was still segregated in 1939, and they denied Anderson access to perform.¹⁵ As this controversy grew, seeing as Marian Anderson had performed even in the white house four years earlier, Eleanor felt she needed to respond to the matter. First, she presented Marian Anderson with the Spingarn Medal at the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and again invited Marian to perform in the White House. She then took it a step forward and in February she resigned as a member from the DAR, claiming she felt they were setting a horrible example, when they had the opportunity to do the right thing. She then wrote in her column "My Day" the next day speaking about how to be in an organization when they promote and do work that goes against one's own beliefs. She references the actions taken by the DAR excluding Anderson and says of her membership, "To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning."¹⁶ This was a huge step to

¹⁵ "Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson," FDR Presidential Library & Museum, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/anderson>.

¹⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, February 27, 1939," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 12/8/2020, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1939&_f=md055200.

take in showing large support of African American rights, especially being in the position she is. Initially Eleanor though she disapproved of the DAR's actions was not going to go as far as resign, because she was afraid that they would consider her to be too radical, and so she worked to find local responses to this issue. However, as this struggle continued she saw that with her backing and because of her position she could bring attention and action to help Anderson cross this barrier, and needed to do so on a national level.¹⁷ This was a major story within the media and brought large attention to the color barrier that previous events had not done. Eleanor then helped to make sure that Anderson would have her concert at the Lincoln Memorial to which Anderson would to a large crowd of 57,000 people of all races and ages. By showing such a strong support for black artist and communities, as going as far as removing herself from a large patriotic and old group help to push and bring forth this disparity between white and black workers and brought the discussion of racial discrimination further to the public eye. Using her position as First Lady Eleanor was able to create a platform to promote black leaders and artists, giving them national attention on issues that they did not have before, and in doing so further recreated the communication and trust between the American people and her and her husband's administration. Eleanor would use media to further this and did so herself being a prolific writing and radio broadcaster.

Part of why Eleanor Roosevelt had such a wide reach and influence was due to her use of different forms of media. As part of her individual work Eleanor both wrote columns for newspapers and was really big in using radio broadcasting something that no other First Lady had done before. Eleanor began using broadcasting before FDR even entered the presidential

¹⁷ Black, "Championing a Champion", p.7.

office and would continue to use this media platform until her death. One of the main reasons that Eleanor wanted to use radio broadcast was so that she could have what she considered to be conversations with the public. Her radio broadcasts would be hosted on many different topics, from how the white house was run and her everyday business, to her political beliefs and addressing concerns of those of the American people.¹⁸ By using media to make herself approachable to the public, Eleanor Roosevelt created an image and a passage way for those struggling to bring their needs to a larger platform, and created a trust between her and American citizens especially during a time when people were looking for come and change such as the Great Depression.

Using her radio broadcast to connect to different groups of the public, Eleanor often focused on women and their place within society. One of Eleanor's earliest broadcasts was on the Pond's Program, which she started before FDR's inauguration and continued on while she was in the White House. She was a guest on this program every week from 1932-1933 and she often used this platform to talk about women and their roles within a family and society. She also focused on children and marriages in these early broadcasts, and her own life in Washington. Her time as a special guest on this program gave her the lead way to talk more about women besides just their place in marriages and families, but in the work place as well. In her very first radio broadcast in 1932, Eleanor talks about some key differences about women of her older generation and that of young girls of the time saying, "there is greater opportunity to develop perhaps, and with wise parents the girl of today is perhaps earlier able to judge between worthwhile people and undesirable ones. She is better able to take care of herself because her

¹⁸ "Radio and Television," Radio and Television | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/radio-and-television>.

experience is greater”.¹⁹ She expresses how much opportunity for a there is to have a career or path outside of the traditional home life, and how with modern technologies women are better able to experience new and exciting things they were not allowed to take advantage of before, which Eleanor was a champion for. Using this platform of media Eleanor was able to create a woman centered area in politics and women’s issues that was little seen before. It allowed for everyday women to bring their issues to a political and higher place, with more attention and listeners. Her main goal in starting these broadcasts was to reach the public. In her last episode on Pond’s Program Eleanor told her audience “that I shall always hope in one way or another to keep in touch with you, the American people, for I feel you are very close to me.”²⁰ This sentiment would be kept as Roosevelt would create more broadcast to be able to address her concerns and the concerns of the American people, bringing more popularity and sense of familiarity between her and the American people.

However, not many people were fans of the First Ladies broadcasts, and these early programs were highly controversial. While past presidents may have used radio broadcast to show their views, First Ladies certainly were not expected to. Eleanor’s regular use of different medias such as print and radio were unprecedented and seen as out of place, especially because she covered much more than the hosting duties of the White House in these broadcasts, but her views on politics, which she had at the start said she was going to leave out of it.²¹ However, it

¹⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt talk the problems confronting the young women of today-- series of 12 talks" *The Pond's Program*. Dec 9, 1932.

²⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, "ER gives final speech after culmination of program," *The Pond's Program*, Mar 3, 1933.

²¹ Radio and Television," Radio and Television | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/radio-and-television>

became increasingly clear that as she became confident as an activist and journalist, as well as First Lady this is what she would focus on.

The second radio program that Eleanor Roosevelt focused on was the Simmons Program, which was the first radio program that she hosted and lasted 5 episodes in 1934. In this program Eleanor focused on current events and the news going on and by looking at those she shared her own thoughts on it. She brings up topics such as textile strikes, public school education, and women trying to make it in different fields of work.²² She distinctively is asked to answer the question of “When will a woman be president of the United States?” In her response, she talks about how she thinks that the United States is not yet ready for a woman to be president saying,

“Though women are doing more and more and are proving every year that they are capable of assuming responsibilities which were considered to be out of their province in the past, I do not think that we have yet reached the point where the majority of our people would feel satisfied to follow the leadership and trust the judgment of a woman as president and no woman could therefore, succeed as president any more than could any man who did not have the trust and confidence of the majority of the nation for this is a democracy and governed by majority rule.”²³

She continues on after this to say that women have to work just as hard as men in the work force and go on to take care for their children at home, so they have the capability to run the country and to do work like men, however she does not wish for a woman to become president anytime

²² “The Simmons Program,” The Simmons Program | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/simmons-program>.

²³ Eleanor Roosevelt, ““Mrs. Roosevelt continuing the series of five sponsored programs inaugurated in July will be heard during this broadcast as a news commentator discussing “When Will a Woman Be President of the United States?” according to the National Broadcasting Company,” *The Simmons Program*, Sep 4, 1934.

soon. Her concern is that because women just received the right to vote they may elect a woman just because she is a woman. She ends her answer saying that she hopes one day a woman will become president because she has earned the trust and respect of the nation and its people as she hopes all people in power should win it.²⁴ This answer was a huge step in her advocacy for women and her view on what women could do. Though it may seem that her answer does not support women in a way that may be seen as appropriate today, the fact that she discussed it as a possibility and something she would want for the future on such a large platform was a big deal. This was following the backs of the New Women who in the late 19th century and early twentieth century were working to prove that they could hold jobs and that they deserved labor laws and rights because they could work equally as hard as men and that there was not a huge biological difference in how they could work industrially. Eleanor fought largely for women in the work force and had press conferences every week with only women journalists, giving them a women-centered place within journalism. She continually built women up through her broadcasts and writings and made it so that these ideas could be seen by a large audience.

She continues her work for women in the radio program *It's a Woman's World*, which was aired in the spring of 1935. Here she discussed her typical day in the White House, what it is like to be the wife of a public official and continues to discuss successful and powerful women she knows.²⁵ She continually provides hope and opportunity for women and gives this platform or them to be heard, especially young women. And has similar content in the radio Program *Talks by Mrs. Roosevelt* in which she discusses different topics with friends, colleagues,

²⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁵ "It's a Woman's World," *It's a Woman's World* | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/its-womans-world>.

journalist, and even students about issues that they are facing and her life in the white house. It is in 1940 on the radio program Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt's Own Program that she changes a lot of her topic of mainly women centered spaces to more of a youth centered one. She discusses education of the youth in America, and how they can contribute to democracy. She discusses how Americans can relate to Europeans in World War II as the United States has not technically entered the War yet, and the conditions necessary for world peace, and what Americans need to do to maintain freedom. And she speaks a lot on her travels both to foreign areas and around the country on FDR's campaign trail. ²⁶ Because Eleanor is so open on her topics and discussions she unprecedentedly made an area for common people to be able to discuss these major issues with people in Washington, it gave them a better connection to top leaders and it allowed them to stay connected to what was going on within the White House and quite possibly what could come in the future. This especially became important when the United States entered World War II, at the time Eleanor was now on the radio program Over Our Coffee Cups, where she discusses world news and national news, as well as continued advocating for youth programs and poverty. But when the Attack on Pearl Harbor happened she shifted gears to how the American people could come together as a community, and preserve throughout the war. She even had a radio broadcast on December 7th, 1941 after FDR gave his national address, regarding the attack saying,

“You cannot escape anxiety, you cannot escape the clutch of fear at your heart, and yet I hope that the certainty of what we have to meet will make you rise above these fears. We must go about our daily business, more determined than ever to do the ordinary things as

²⁶ “Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt's Own Program,” Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt's Own Program | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/mrs-eleanor-roosevelts-own-program>.

well as we can, and when we find a way to do anything more in our communities to help others, to build morale, to give a feeling of security, we must do it. Whatever is asked of us, I'm sure we can accomplish it.”²⁷

Her address helped to bring a sense of community to the American people. In the broadcast, she specifically speaks to the women of the United States, asking them to continue to be the backbone on the home front and to keep daily life running. She is able to call on these groups because of the trust and connection she was able to create between them and herself and the presidency. And she also directly addresses the youth of the United States, imploring them to take this as an opportunity to support and build the United States into a stronger nation.²⁸ Even in this tragic moment Eleanor Roosevelt calls upon the groups that she defends and look out for the most. She creates a space for them in this community she is calling for. In using these radio programs from her early activism in women's issues all the way to traveling and in national times of crisis, Eleanor is able to speak her mind on issues and create spaces for minorities that are needed.

Her transparency in beliefs though these broadcasts and media were not completely welcomed. While most First Ladies before her may not have shared their individual views, nor were they expected to have differing views from their husbands, Eleanor Roosevelt did. FDR often told her she could speak her own mind and that is precisely what she did through media. She created a newspaper column called “My Day” that she published every day detailing not

²⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, “This episode begins with ER discussing the attack on Pearl Harbor and the actions that citizens must take in response to the attack,” *Over Our Coffee Cups*, Dec 7, 1941.

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

only what she had done but what her views were on certain issues.²⁹ Her created space and forum for only female journalist to come and interview her and things going on in Washington, helped to better define that trust that they had with her even to a point that in 1940 while FDR was running for a third term as president, Geoffrey T. Hellman writes in *Life* magazine, “A good many of the Washington newspaperwomen who meet Mrs. Roosevelt for press conferences every Monday that she is in the White House are not sure they want to see the President re-elected, but they do feel in any case Eleanor Roosevelt should not be demoted.”³⁰ This trust in Eleanor and not FDR shows a great connection that she was able to make, and shows the interest of many groups in what she believed in and was an activist for. Without Eleanor FDR may not have had the push or likeability to be re-elected so many times.

While FDR himself had no issue with his wife speaking her mind and often encouraged her too, she often did not share the same ideas as FDR and his team. Eleanor was seen as more liberal than FDR in her activism and in how she expressed and shared those views with the American people. Even people within FDR’s team found Eleanor to be too outspoken as a politician’s wife and as First Lady because she differed, and were afraid that FDR’s enemies would view her as controlling the president and take her views as his own. Which in some cases they did, often journalists would look to Eleanor’s daily column “My Day” as an indicator of what the president might be thinking and what the next steps the White House might be taking in

²⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 12/8/2020, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1939&_f=md055200.

³⁰ Geoffrey T. Hellman, “Mrs. Roosevelt,” *Life* 8, no. 6 (February 5, 1940): 70–78. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lma&AN=112446550&login.asp%3fcustid%3ds8474154&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

political issues and actions.³¹ However, because of this, FDR soon found that he could float ideas through her column to see the reaction of the American people. Her column my day touched on topics as small as what she did in the White House to her personal beliefs on important political issues and what she advocated for.

When starting this column in 1935 she would often discuss what was going on in the lives of the American people that wrote to her. Often people, especially starting in the Great Depression, would write to Eleanor asking for help or sharing their experience and how they felt Eleanor was inspiring them.³² She created an open space where she would get hundreds of letters every day from citizens. This form of correspondence with the people furthered her mission to listen to those who needed help the most and those who represented the larger American population. By sharing these letters and her responses in both her radio broadcasts and in “My Day” she was able to connect with people, and share these new ideas that were not widely discussed and expressed at a presidential type level. As her column grew and new issues arrived she changed her focus on topics, she would use “My Day” to try and gain support for the New Deal, the Resettlement Act, the National Youth Administration, which fell to mixed reviews. One component that those who disliked Eleanor latched onto was her discussion and advocacy for African-American civil rights, and especially the hope for desegregation within the army.³³ She used her column to support these ideas and views that at the time found a lot of opposition. By having her column as a personal entry, the American people and readers could see Eleanor Roosevelt’s character and not just as the wife of the president, her media use gave her a space within her own and separate from her husband’s views, though they often aligned. Her personal

³¹ Boller, *Presidential Wives*.

³² Susan Ware, *Modern American Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

³³ thoughts on AA in army

touch in speaking to and for those oppressed created a new ideal that as First Lady, she could have political power and that she should use it as an advocate.

Eleanor Roosevelt would continue to use radio broadcasts and her column “My Day” long after FDR passed and she left the White House, showing how much power she gained as a figure on her own outside of being the First Lady. She gained footing as a leader, activist, and journalist and showed that power can be gained within that position, because of the connection to the president and the White House. Though her use of media and her ability to connect with the American people she creates a new connection between common citizens and Washington that then becomes a new expectation and responsibility to future leaders and First Ladies in the white house. It gives them the responsibility to be accessible to the people’s issues, more clearly than before.

Eleanor not only maintained that relationship with the American people through media, but through her extensive travel as well. Eleanor’s travels were unprecedented for a First Lady. It was such a shift in how first ladies worked and traveled that many times just the act of her traveling was reported on by the *New York Times*. A short article written in March of 1933 reported that she was the first First Lady to travel by plane, and that “the first airplane ride ever taken by a President’s wife was a ‘perfectly good trip but very bumpy.’”³⁴ The novelty of a First Lady traveling at all made Eleanor’s political travels even more astounding. Because Eleanor and Franklin’s relationship was more than just that of husband and wife it was of partners, friends,

³⁴ "PRESIDENT'S WIFE FLIES TO CAPITAL: SHE SETS PRECEDENT AS THE FIRST WHITE HOUSE LADY TO TRAVEL IN PLANE. CHILD SITS IN HER LAP ROOSEVELTS WILL CELEBRATE TODAY ANNIVERSARY OF THEIR WEDDING HERE 28 YEARS AGO." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 17, 1933. <https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/historical-newspapers/presidents-wife-flies-capital/docview/100739239/se-2?accountid=14703>.

and equals. FDR listened to his wife's advice on issues and was a reliable source for him to send when he could not go himself nor had another political ally to help him. This trust began Eleanor's large travel based in campaigning and lecturing. Though rare for her First Ladies before her, it became common for Eleanor Roosevelt to give address and speeches and she was coached in how to do so by FDR's political advisors and office.³⁵ Eleanor's ability to connect with people and speak to them in a more personal manner, was extremely beneficial to both FDR and his work and to her own activism. These travels showed her the experiences and what life was like around the United States for average people and for minorities. By learning from the communities around her and the resources of political knowledge surrounding her through her husband Eleanor Roosevelt grew to have a vast understanding of political ideas arguments and issues, and she had very strong opinions on these topics.³⁶ Her travels not only fueled her drive to become more involved in activism but they gave her insight into what that activism should and might look like.

She went on tours herself to discuss her advocacy projects and would travel on international tours in order to understand what troops both in Europe and in the Pacific Rim were undergoing. She would often travel with Lorena Hickok the only women journalist who was regularly assigned to cover White House news. In her writing Hickok writes that Eleanor Roosevelt had endless energy and would end the day everyday doing research on different political issues or responding to letters sent to her by the American people.³⁷ Eleanor is described as unstoppable and tirelessly working and striving for her own political goals and goals as an advocate for minorities. It is often her ability to influence those around her and her tenacity

³⁵ *Ibid.*,

³⁶ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Vol. 1–3. 3 vols. New York: Viking, 1992

³⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

that is remarked upon by Hickok. This drive and desire to meet real American people who are struggling are what lead Eleanor and her travels to be so important to her own autonomy but to her husband's work as president as well. While Hickok writes fondly of Eleanor and her lectures, there were many critics of her travel and speeches as well, and how she speaks on behalf of FDR. Arguably Roosevelt's greatest critics, Westbrook Pegler, in one of his many articles regarding Eleanor writes, "Mrs. Roosevelt, holds no certificate of election, but it seems agreed that she does partake of her husband's office, and I have heard no specific denial of the contention that she has used her position for private gain."³⁸ This critic by Pegler is really regarding her push for unionization of laborers and how to make the New Deal more effective, which is one of her primary goals within traveling around the U.S. In some ways Pegler is correct, she does take power and control through her relationship to FDR, but while he views it as too liberal and a sign of communism, Eleanor retorts back that she is simply working to help the majority of American people. Roosevelt spent most of her time traveling when she was First Lady within the United States visiting New Deal projects, touring schools, factories, and other institutions, in order to see how those who were unrepresented such as the workers, children, and veterans. She wanted to see how the majority of Americans were living and how she and FDR could help to improve those livelihoods.

When traveling and giving her many lectures and speeches, she would make two lecture tours around the United States every year. By being so busy with traveling and her radio shows and columns she caught the attention of *Life* magazine in 1940 which reported that she had

³⁸ Westbrook Pegler. "Fair enough: The President's Wife." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Mar 08, 1941. <https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/historical-newspapers/fair-enough/docview/151440084/se-2?accountid=14703>.

visited almost every state, given hundreds of lectures, and traveled nearly 300,000 miles.³⁹ This amount of travel was unprecedented for first ladies and it was often joked that Eleanor spent more nights away from Washington D.C. than she did there.

While traveling during WWII she visited both to European and Pacific troops to see what conditions were like not only for U.S. soldiers but of other ally groups as well. This again was tradition breaking, as stated in a *New York Times* article, reporting that she was the first First Lady to travel across the Atlantic on her own and into a war zone.⁴⁰ This showed that she could be trusted and have enough authority to go to other countries on behalf of the U.S. and the president unlike any First Lady before. In 1942 as the invitation of Queen Elizabeth, she visited to study the strategy of British Soldiers on the home front. She spent almost a month inspecting hospitals, barracks, bomb shelters, red cross centers, and military groups to see how they were being treated as well as what could be improved.⁴¹ She was incredibly impressed by the bravery and hardship that they were facing and would write constantly to FDR about how the United States could help or improve their own strategy upon entering the war. One thing that she focused on the most was how women were a part of the war. British women were able to join a civilians group called the Women's Voluntary Services, that helped provide support, food, water for those who had been bombed out or for war workers that needed to find new housing. Female

³⁹ Mary Scheer, "Bound for Beaumont", 2016.

⁴⁰ W.H. LAWRENCE, "MRS. ROOSEVELT BREAKS STILL MORE TRADITIONS: FIRST PRESIDENT'S WIFE TO FLY ATLANTIC, SHE IS EXPOSED TO WAR HAZARDS," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 25, 1942. <https://login.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/historical-newspapers/mrs-roosevelt-breaks-still-more-traditions/docview/106282548/se-2?accountid=14703>.

⁴¹ "Touring the British Homefront (1942)," Touring the British Homefront (1942) | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/touring-british-homefront-1942>.

war workers were also provided with on-site child care so that it was easier to combine family and working for the war. She also routinely mentioned the harsh conditions of living on the Homefront and the scarcity of food. Taking note on how to better advocate for them and the American GI's overseas. She then went on in 1943 to the Pacific Rim which was considered to be substantially more dangerous for her to do. While in the Pacific Rim Eleanor's trip focused more on the soldiers there and how she could help them in that time. She wrote about how dangerous and horrible it was to live in a war zone and about the cruel realities of the lives being lost there. She would often take down the names of the GI's that she interacted with in order to contact their families when she returned to the U.S. in order to help give them communication. While her presence created a new problem for those who needed to protect her even admiral William F. Halsey later said, "She alone accomplished more good than any other person or any group of civilians who passed through my area."⁴² She was able to connect with the soldiers there and remind them of home and give them motherly affection they missed.⁴³ Eleanor again found a way to connect to the American people, this time soldiers and help foster a connection to the white house and presidency that had not been there so clearly before.

By traveling Eleanor not only was able to make sure that New Deal projects were going well, and to be the eyes and ears of FDR, she was also able to create a relationship with herself and the American people creating a trust and popularity in the White House that was new.

⁴² "In the South Pacific War Zone (1943)," In the South Pacific War Zone (1943) | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/south-pacific-war-zone-1943>.

⁴³ "FIRST LADY'S SOUTH PACIFIC TOUR. (Cover Story)." *Life* 15, no. 15 (October 11, 1943): 27–31. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy-eres.up.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lma&AN=112465265&login.asp%3fcustid%3ds8474154&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Traveling gave her the freedom to express her political ideas, and to advocate and see the realities of the country she was helping to lead and shape alongside FDR. Most First Ladies now also follow this example, they are expected to be able to give speeches and addresses as well as be able to go to functions on the behalf of the president. As well as be emissaries to foreign nations. This power and expectations given to First Ladies now makes them much more important than simply being the wife or spouse of a president, but allows for them to be seen as an authority figure in politics.

The position of First Lady is not an official political position and therefore traditionally has no official responsibilities or duties that are required with it besides hostess, and consequently the role has changed and transformed due to the women who have previously held it. Eleanor Roosevelt was the first to drastically change what it meant to be first lady and was able to give the position not only meaning through association of the president but through the role itself. Eleanor was able to create a space for advocacy and leadership next to the president while also supporting her husband and his policies as well. Eleanor's unique position of being in the public spotlight as well as being able to speak freely with the president gave her the opportunity to use this power to her own advantage and the advantage of those she advocated for. By being a partner to FDR and not merely a wife and hostess, Eleanor found that she could create political backing to the title of First Lady, and used that to bring popularity and change to the presidency as well.

The Roosevelts became one of the most popular and beloved families in the White House because of their advocacy and because of their communication with the American people, in due to Eleanor's efforts to understand everyday life for the average citizen especially during a difficult time like the Great Depression and World War II. This effect of being devoted to the

public can be seen as trying to be imitated by future First Ladies in how they no longer have a choice of being in the media or not. While before Eleanor, first ladies were rarely discussed, with a few exceptions, Eleanor created a spotlight within the media for herself and therefore the First Lady position. Now First Ladies are regularly discussed within the media from their actions to their wardrobe. Though Eleanor has created a position for advocacy and change, the First Lady is often only viewed and scrutinized for outfit choices. All modern First Ladies have faced this criticism, especially Eleanor. As even stated by her own mother, Eleanor was not a particularly beautiful or good-looking girl, and the media often use that point to deter from what she was saying or the work that she was doing. Even at a conference in 1933 in which Eleanor was speaking about how to help the needy get through the winter, reporter Rita S. Halle writes of the event, "Despite a lithe, graceful figure, she is not beautiful. She does not charm by her personal appearance."⁴⁴ The initial response to Eleanor's work in helping the needy is her appearance and how she presents to others. Eleanor is often depicted by cartoonist and journalists as manish and unattractive due to her height and larger frame. This scrutiny of appearances can be mirrored in many first ladies since.

Besides wardrobes how involved a First Lady is in her husband political affairs is also scrutinized, just as Eleanor was criticized and seen as interfering with FDR too much, modern first ladies have had to toe that line as well. While it is expected for First Ladies to be an advocate of a particular cause, there is often criticism and problems seen with the First Lady having more say and involvement. There has been a divide in how those first ladies are seen, as

⁴⁴ Jill Lepore April 27, "Eleanor Roosevelt: 'Can a Woman Ever Be President of the United States?'," Literary Hub, April 12, 2019, <https://lithub.com/eleanore-roosevelt-can-a-woman-ever-be-president-of-the-united-states/>.

traditional versus more progressive. A traditional first lady is seen as someone who is there just to support their husbands as president and their careers.⁴⁵ Whereas more progressive first ladies both support their husband but get involved in politics and social issues on their own. Or they are seen as having more jobs or work than just that of supporting the president. This difference in how a first lady is viewed and received by the public can be pivotal just as it was with Eleanor. Though Roosevelt had many critics who felt she was reaching beyond her place and what a First Lady should do, she also was able to amass devoted followers and effectively change the parameters of the First Ladyship to extend beyond those gendered ideologies. The position of First Lady thanks to Eleanor Roosevelt now is one that contains its own power in advocacy and politics, as well as one that is followed by the media and scrutinized if not used in a productive or now publicly expected way.

This is seen pretty well in more modern First Ladies. The First Ladies of the twentieth and twenty-first century have been partners to their husbands politically in campaigning and finding support, as well as political figures themselves through activism. Every First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt has taken her lead in finding an activist cause to champion for and bring those troubles more closely to the attention of the president in order to be able to enact change and get minority groups and struggles onto a larger platform with more exposure. Eleanor Roosevelt started this trend with her major interest in women's rights, African American issues, and the issues of the working youth within the U.S. While First Ladies now may not focus on as many issues as Roosevelt did, they are expected to champion a cause. Each first lady whether they were able to do much within their activism still had to formally show they were involved within it. For example, Betty Ford had a similar spirit to Eleanor in that although she

⁴⁵ Troy, *Mr. and Mrs. President*.

did not intend or desire to be First Lady she used to opportunity tits fullest extent in ways of being outspoken and activism. Betty Ford spoke out in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, both calling senators as a lobbyist, and participating in women's conferences on the subject. She was considered to be more liberal than her husband and used her position to speak out on those views such as being pro-choice.⁴⁶ It is because of Eleanor's work to give the First Lady position a larger platform and influence, that Betty was able to work and promote the Equal Rights Amendment, as well as be active in women's rights of second wave feminism.

Similarly, Eleanor's use of media both connected her to the American public and gave her issues and activism a larger platform than before, which future first ladies have capitalized on. Michelle Obama in her campaign "Let's Move!" in which she tries to help fight childhood obesity among the American public expertly uses media to promote it. Michele teamed up with famous musician and artist Beyoncé, to create a song and video called Let's Move! Flash Workout.⁴⁷ By using a huge star like Beyoncé, Michelle reached her audience of children and teens in a clever way. This gave her issue lots of coverage as well as a way for the public to easily participate. By using media Michelle, like Eleanor was able to further promote her cause and be a connection from everyday American, including the youth, to a larger health issue facing the United States.

⁴⁶ "Betty Ford: Activist First Lady," WHHA (en-US), accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/betty-ford-activist-first-lady>.

⁴⁷ "Beyonce Joins Michelle Obama's Initiative To Fight Childhood Obesity," WebCite query result, accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.webcitation.org/5zNnAjqWm?url=https%3A%2F%2Fabcnews.go.com%2FHealth%2Fbeyonce-drops-music-video-fight-childhood-obesity%2Fstory%3Fid>.

An example in which First Ladies have continued to utilize travel to promote their activism like Eleanor, and to connect to the American public, is Nancy Reagan's campaign "Just Say No." This was Nancy Reagan's work in a part of the United States' "War on Drugs" in which she aimed to try and teach discourage children from participating in recreational drug use. She would travel around the countries and to other nations talking about this campaign and visiting rehabilitation centers, much like Eleanor traveled and visited other New Deal projects. Nancy Reagan would travel around 250,000 miles campaigning for this cause.⁴⁸ Just as Eleanor used travel as a way to connect to the public, Nancy Reagan used this travel to try and connect to the youth of the U.S.

It is incredible to look at the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt and how she was able to drastically change the role of First Lady and her own position in life. She not only made major impact within her personal life by moving from an unhappy housewife to a political and powerful figure, but she also made great change for many minority groups within the United States. Due to her tireless efforts in creating communication and trust between the White House and the common American people, she was able to support FDR while he enacted the New Deal and make the American people feel hopeful during the Great Depression and second World War. She created this new communication and connection to Washington through countless letters to and from citizens, her radio broadcasts speaking on her own views on important matters, and through her columns depicting life in the White House and life in the United States. She was able to make new venues of work for women by being a fierce feminist and creating women only

⁴⁸ "First Lady Biography: Nancy Reagan," Nancy Reagan Biography :: National First Ladies' Library, accessed December 9, 2020, <http://www.firstladies.org/Biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=41>.

spaces for journalist within Washington. She also brought attention to issues involving Civil Rights and segregation, and gave support to the African American community by interacting and hosting them in the White House in a way never done before. By caring about the American people Eleanor worked to create a better society for them and in doing so was able to grab power and prestige within her role and place in politics. Eleanor broke out of the traditional idea that the First Lady is only there to support their husbands, by transforming it into a role that showed they, though not technically a political role, can use that political proximity to fight for advocacy and support themselves as well. She left a legacy that now expect First Ladies to support their husbands but to also support the communities of the United States in a way the president cannot. The First Ladies position is one of communication used to help the common U.S. citizen, that the president may not have the time or flexibility to have, and in that they can connect to people and make their own power. Eleanor Roosevelt has changed the First Lady position to one of power and expected advocacy and support.

Eleanor Roosevelt has often been heralded as revolutionary and powerful within the position of First Lady, by being able to obtain power and by being able to bring issues of minorities to a larger scale, changing what she was expected to do to what she was able to do. Although the position of First Lady held little political power, Eleanor Roosevelt drastically changed that position not only allowing opportunity but creating expectations for future First Ladies, or possibly First Gentlemen. Through her activism, wide spread use of media, and travel Eleanor Roosevelt was able to make herself an essential political figure of the twentieth century as well as leave a legacy attached to the position of First Lady, that if not followed and fulfilled could not only be detrimental to the presidencies that follow but for the groups championed by First Ladies.

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