



America's First Ladies

Eleanor Roosevelt as First Lady

by *Maurine Beasley*

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962), one of the most admired women in American history, acted as first lady from 1933 until 1945, longer than any other presidential spouse, and put that position on the nation's political map. Yet, ironically, Eleanor did not want the job because she thought it would hamper her own self-development as an independent person. Through her own path-breaking efforts she transformed her role from official hostess to important spokesperson for her husband's administration. In the process she became a role model for millions of Americans who applauded her activism on behalf of social causes.



Photograph of Eleanor Roosevelt, July 20, 1933. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

When her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had been unable to walk for eleven years due to infantile paralysis, was elected president in the depths of the Depression in 1932, she wrote in her autobiography that she was happy for him. She believed that being president would “make up for the blow that fate had dealt him” and that he would steer the country through the crisis confronting it.[1] But for herself, she continued, “I was deeply troubled. As I saw it, this meant the end of any personal life of my own. . . . I had watched Mrs Theodore Roosevelt and had seen what it meant to be the wife of a president, and I cannot say that I was pleased at the prospect.”[2] Before Franklin's election, Eleanor had launched her own career as a writer and teacher. As she put it, “By earning my own money, I had recently enjoyed a certain amount of financial independence and had been able to do things in which I was personally interested.”[3]

While many women might have been thrilled at the prospect of living in the White House, Eleanor was not, fearing she would be virtually imprisoned there, endlessly pouring tea in empty social rituals. A Roosevelt herself before her marriage, Eleanor was the daughter of Elliott Roosevelt, the younger brother of Theodore (“Uncle Teddy”) Roosevelt, and his beautiful wife, Anna Hall Roosevelt. Her parents' marriage fell apart due to Elliott's drinking and womanizing, and Eleanor, who was considered plain, felt scorned by her mother. By the time she was ten years old, both of her parents had died, and she had gone to live in the troubled household of her widowed maternal grandmother, Mary Ludlow Hall, who had difficulty managing her own children.

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Eleanor experienced the happiest period of her girlhood at Allenswood, an exclusive finishing school in England that she attended for three years, but her grandmother insisted she come home in 1902 and make the conventional debut that signaled upper-class young women were ready for marriage. More serious-minded than many in her social set, Eleanor volunteered to teach at a settlement house in a poor neighborhood. She also caught the eye of her dashing fifth cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the two became engaged over the objections of his domineering mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, who reluctantly consented to their marriage.

With “Uncle Teddy” serving as president from 1901 until 1909, Eleanor had ample opportunities to visit the White House. She observed “Aunt Edith,” Theodore’s wife, Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt, playing a confining role as hostess and did not envy her. Eleanor turned down her aunt and uncle’s offer of a White House wedding and was married in New York City on March 17, 1905, at the home of a cousin. Theodore gave away the bride; his presence upstaged Franklin and Eleanor.[4]

When she was married, Eleanor was only twenty years old. Franklin, who had grown up on his family estate at Hyde Park, New York, was just twenty-three and finishing his senior year at Harvard University. The couple was financially dependent on Sara, who paid many of their bills.[5] Franklin pursued a political career, first in the New York State legislature in Albany and from 1913 to 1920 as assistant secretary of the Navy in Washington, while Eleanor, who had six children from 1906 to 1916 (one of whom died in infancy), immersed herself in conventional social and domestic concerns. Creating family friction, Sara sought to run Eleanor’s household and take over child-rearing responsibilities from her shy and inexperienced daughter-in-law.

Eleanor’s life changed dramatically in the World War I era. As a Red Cross worker, she broadened her own horizons volunteering in canteens and hospitals. But her personal world was shattered in 1918 when she learned that Franklin had fallen in love with Lucy Mercer, her social secretary. The couple considered divorce but decided to stay together for the sake of the children and his political career.[6] Overcoming her own insecurity, Eleanor began to build a life for herself outside of her family, recognizing opportunities open to women after getting the vote in 1920. She formed alliances with political women and social reformers, first in the New York League of Women Voters and then in the Democratic Party itself. When Franklin contracted polio in 1921, she nursed him devotedly, but generally remained in New York when, accompanied by his private secretary, Marguerite “Missy” LeHand, he traveled to warmer climates in efforts to regain his health.

In the 1920s Eleanor became increasingly well known herself as a speaker, writer for women’s magazines, radio commentator, and force within the Women’s Division of the New York State Democratic Party. With two friends, Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, she started a furniture factory at Val-Kill, a site on the Hyde Park estate where the three women built their own cottage as a retreat from Sara in the “Big House.” The three also bought Todhunter, a private school for girls in New York City, where Eleanor enjoyed teaching.[7] When Franklin was elected governor of New York in 1928, Eleanor spent only part of each week in the governor’s mansion. She used her earnings for contributions to organizations she believed in, such as women’s trade unions, as well as personal expenses. Louis Howe, Franklin’s chief political strategist, acted as her agent, seeing Eleanor as part of a political partnership.

Apprehensive that Franklin’s election as president would stop her own career, Eleanor confided her fears to a new intimate friend, Lorena Hickok, a reporter for the Associated Press, who covered Eleanor during the 1932 presidential campaign. Hickok became so close to Eleanor that she had to resign from her job because she could not report objectively on the Roosevelts. Using her press contacts, Hickok proposed Eleanor hold press conferences limited to woman reporters, who faced discrimination from male colleagues and needed to find news that men could not get, as one way to make the first lady’s role more than strictly ceremonial. Aware that it previously had been considered unladylike for presidents’ wives to seek publicity, a nervous Eleanor held her first conference on March 6, 1933, just two days after Franklin’s inauguration. It was the first of some 348 to come that helped establish Eleanor as a figure of importance in the administration’s New Deal program to combat the Depression.

In the conferences Eleanor spoke out on current issues, although she said she would not intrude on her husband’s domain. While announcing the White House social schedule and answering questions about her

wardrobe and family life, Eleanor used the conferences to shine a spotlight on women of achievement, who she brought in as her guests; advocate the New Deal; and, on one occasion, to protest efforts to cut the federal payroll by firing married women.[8] While forced to stop teaching at Todhunter because of the demands of her position, she discovered that being first lady enhanced, rather than constricted, her career opportunities and offered a platform for her to speak up for the downtrodden.

While critics accused her of profiting from her position, she kept on writing, lecturing, and broadcasting, affirming by example the right of married women to make money. She donated most of her earnings to charity, announcing in 1934 that she was resuming radio broadcasting determined to “get the money for a good cause and take the gaff.”[9] While many of her broadcasts, like her paid lectures, concentrated on noncontroversial topics like typical days in the White House, they emphasized her commitment to education, youth, and women’s participation in politics to stimulate social improvement.

Similarly, she wrote a popular syndicated newspaper column, “My Day,” billed as a diary recording her extraordinary array of daily activities, which included extensive travels. During Franklin’s first two terms, from 1933 to 1941, she traveled some 300,000 miles, far more than any of her predecessors as first lady, acting as a fact-finder for her physically handicapped husband; campaigning for Democratic candidates; promoting the administration; and visiting her children, who were scattered around the country. It was in “My Day” in 1939 that she announced her resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution, a patriotic organization, because it refused to allow Marian Anderson, a noted African American singer, to perform in its Washington concert hall due to her race. Eleanor, a more outspoken proponent of civil rights than Franklin, was listed as the first sponsor of Anderson’s subsequent concert on Easter Sunday before an integrated crowd at the Lincoln Memorial.[10] “My Day” humanized Franklin’s presidency, with Eleanor picturing him as a husband and father. In a similar view, her numerous articles and advice columns for women’s magazines, particularly the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which serialized the first part of her autobiography in 1937, displayed her ability to reach average readers.

Although detractors ridiculed her physical appearance and devotion to good works, vast segments of the public admired her. In 1939 the Gallup poll found 67 percent of Americans approved of her as first lady compared to 58 percent who approved of Franklin’s actions as president. That year *Time* magazine featured her on its cover and called her the “world’s foremost female political force.”[11] In 1940 she delivered a major address before the Democratic National Convention to unite the party in support of Franklin’s precedent-breaking third term.[12]

When the United States entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Eleanor, due to a pre-existing contract, delivered a radio address before Franklin, calling on civilians to aid the war effort. She continued this appeal throughout the war, flying all over the world to visit service personnel. Some decried her travels during a time of gasoline rationing in the United States, while others applauded her morale-building efforts.

Franklin died unexpectedly on April 12, 1945, shortly after being inaugurated for a fourth term, but Eleanor’s career did not end there. She served with distinction as US representative to the United Nations from 1945 to 1953, and led its Human Rights Commission in developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted in 1948, today it is considered one of the world’s most important documents.

A firm supporter of the state of Israel, Eleanor continued to write, lecture, and appear on radio and television on behalf of liberal causes until she became fatally ill from anemia and tuberculosis. She died in New York City on November 7, 1962, at the age of seventy-eight. Her death drew front-page coverage all over the world. Acting Secretary-General U Thant of the United Nations said, “She was truly the first

lady of the world.”[13]

[1] Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984, reprint of previous versions), 162.

[2] *Autobiography*, 163.

[3] *Autobiography*, 163.

[4] Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: 1884–1933*. Vol. 1 (New York: Viking, 1992), 162.

[5] Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 177.

[6] For a full discussion of the complexities of the Roosevelt marriage, see Hazel Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 67–89.

[7] “Todhunter School,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, eds. Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001 and ABC-CLIO.com/product.aspx?isbn=9780313301810), 515–518.

[8] See Betty Houchin Winfield, “Mrs. Roosevelt’s Press Conference Association: The First Lady Shines a Light,” *Journalism History* 8 (Summer 1981): 54–55, 63–67.

[9] Paul S. Belgrade, “Radio Broadcasts,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 425–429.

[10] See Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939–1963.” *Journalism of American History* 80 (June 1993): 135–167.

[11] Maurine H. Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 164.

[12] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 124–136.

[13] Mieke van Thoor, “Death of Eleanor Roosevelt,” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 122–125.

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