16. A New Kind of First Lady: Eleanor Roosevelt in the White House

Eleanor Roosevelt revolutionized the role of First Lady. No presidential wife had been so outspoken about the nation’s affairs or more hardworking in its causes. ER conveyed to the American people a deep concern for their welfare. In all their diversity, Americans loved her in return.

When she could have remained aloof or adopted the ceremonial role traditional for First Ladies, ER chose to immerse herself in all the challenges of the 1930s and ‘40s. She dedicated her tireless spirit to bolstering Americans against the fear and despair inflicted by the Great Depression and World War II. She became one of the New Deal’s most effective advocates, and she challenged Americans to embrace democracy and reject prejudice.

ER built her own platform and used it as very much a leader in her own right. She held her own press conferences, launched a nationally syndicated six-day-a-week newspaper column, and traveled the nation without Secret Service protection. Inside the White House, she lobbied administrators to appoint qualified women to senior positions; criticized New Deal policies that ignored women’s concerns; championed the creation of programs for unemployed youth, artists, and writers; corresponded with thousands of citizens; and served as the administration’s racial conscience.

Although polls at the time of her death in 1962 revealed ER to be one of the most admired women in the world, not everyone liked her, especially during her husband’s presidency, when those who differed with her strongly held progressive beliefs reviled ER as too forward for a First Lady. She did not shy away from controversy. Her support of a West Virginia Subsistence Homestead community spurred debate over the value of communal housing and rural development. By vocally favoring American participation in the World Court, an international tribunal attached to the much-debated League of Nations, ER pushed Americans to see themselves as global citizens. And most notably, her public insistence on acclaimed African American singer Marian Anderson’s right to perform at the Lincoln Memorial drew national attention to the hypocrisy of discrimination.

As one friend noted, ER transformed her position into “a springboard for usefulness,” and, in doing so, she “captured the imagination of the country.”
Eleanor Roosevelt, the Journalist

When Eleanor Roosevelt became First Lady, she could no longer keep the job she loved, teaching history at the Todhunter School for Girls in New York City. But after a few months of working with the press, she understood that the most effective way to disseminate her message as First Lady was to get it out herself. So ER embraced writing and soon gained as much joy from it as she had from teaching. She also launched a nationwide lecture tour that would last for twenty years.

Although ER’s byline is most prominently associated with My Day, the six-day-a-week column she wrote for twenty-six years, she also penned If You Ask Me, a monthly question-and-answer column, for more than a decade. By the time she left the White House, she had joined the Newspaper Guild and become one of the nation’s most syndicated journalists and sought-after speakers. She soon expanded beyond the thousands of columns and articles she wrote for newspapers and magazines to author twenty-seven books, including a best-selling three-volume autobiography. Eager to embrace new media, she also hosted roundtables on radio and television.

ER took such pride in her craft that when asked to list a profession, ER routinely declared herself a “journalist.”
Eleanor Roosevelt, Arthurdale, and Subsistence Homesteads

In August 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt drove to Scotts Run, West Virginia, to visit a group of coal miners who had been out of work for more than eight years. The slums she saw appalled her. Families huddled in decaying shacks and used sewage- and coal-tainted water for cooking, bathing, and washing clothes. They boiled weeds for food. ER also learned of a plan by West Virginia University’s extension service to relocate the miners to a large farm, where they could grow food and engage in communal industry to support a better and more secure standard of living.

When ER told Franklin D. Roosevelt about what she’d seen, he replied that the New Deal’s Subsistence Homesteads Division, created that very summer with the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, was designed to create just such communities. Through the program, the government would help desperately poor urban and rural workers relocate to new communities where they could supplement their meager incomes with the crops they raised. The government would issue low-interest loans to the communities and take a direct hand in purchasing land, farm equipment, and livestock, as well as in building homes, roads, and utilities infrastructure. The “homesteaders” would be given thirty years to repay the loans.

The people of Scotts Run would make up the first of roughly a hundred of these homestead communities created under the New Deal. ER fervently embraced the development, established on 1,200 acres near Scotts Run and dubbed Arthurdale after the family that had owned the land. She wanted Arthurdale to show what a planned rural community could offer. She selected its homesteaders, shopped for refrigerators and indoor plumbing fixtures, recruited investors, hired teachers, and funded the community school. She often drove up from Washington, DC, to attend school events and the community’s music festival. She visited the people of Arthurdale in their homes, and, year after year, spoke at their children’s high school graduations.

For the plan to succeed, however, the homesteaders needed income. Congress did nothing to encourage businesses to relocate there, and ER’s persistent efforts were less successful than she hoped. When the GE vacuum cleaner plant she and financier Bernard Baruch had recruited for Arthurdale closed, salaries disappeared. Homesteaders could not attain self-sufficiency, and the press attacked the program as lavish and unrealistic. In 1941, the government began selling the Arthurdale property, first at reduced prices to homesteaders, later at higher prices, completing the sales by 1947.

When businesses refused to invest in Arthurdale, ER acknowledged that eager workers and abundant resources alone couldn’t encourage employers to open new plants. But she took great satisfaction from the way Arthurdale had lifted a community of families out of abject poverty, allowing their children to get an education and launch successful careers.
Eleanor Roosevelt and the New Deal

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had little influence in the crafting of major New Deal policies, but she did influence their application. She understood that for Americans to embrace the New Deal, they needed both a clear understanding of what its policies could do and the courage to overcome the inertia of despair. Speaking in her own voice and not as an official White House spokesperson, ER became an invaluable interpreter and promoter of the New Deal.

She traveled the nation visiting work-relief projects and publicized them in her columns and speeches. When anti–New Dealers opposed the Social Security Act establishing old-age pensions and unemployment benefits, or assailed new federal labor laws encouraging collective bargaining (the National Labor Relations Act) and setting a minimum wage (the Fair Labor Standards Act), she became one of their most outspoken advocates. ER was also a vocal defender of the controversial Federal Theatre Project, which put Americans to work creating original dramatic productions that were often experimental, expressed the viewpoints of minority artists in a new way, and took on troubling social and political problems.

She used her monthly magazine column, and later her nationally syndicated newspaper column, to launch a conversation with the American public about New Deal policy, their lives, and their dreams. Americans responded by writing her millions of candid letters, detailing the burdens they carried and their hopes for the New Deal. Their stories become part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s bedside reading and shaped ER’s vision for what the New Deal could achieve. Her letters back to them lifted their spirits and inspired an intense devotion to the New Deal.

ER also fought to secure a place in the New Deal for marginalized groups. She persuaded FDR to create the National Youth Administration to help out-of-school and unemployed young people. Working in tandem with Democratic Party official Molly Dewson, ER also pressed FDR to appoint twenty-two women to senior positions in the administration, often serving as their advocate and surrogate.

Indeed, while ER celebrated the New Deal, she was not an uncritical ally. She led the charge against Section 213 of the Economy Act, which trimmed the federal budget by cutting from the payroll any woman whose husband was also a federal employee. When the popular Civilian Conservation Corps (which recruited the jobless to work on conservation projects) refused to admit women, ER pressed its directors to construct special camps for them; to attract good press coverage for the female camps, she visited them and met with the women living and working there. As the public became outraged over the effects of New Deal policies to reduce farm output—food was being discarded while Americans went hungry—ER convinced senior officials to distribute excess crops and hog meat to the needy unemployed.

Thus, she was both a friend of the New Deal and a gadfly, pushing its programs toward what mattered to her—common sense, compassion, and inclusiveness.
America’s Most Famous Traveler

Compared with other First Ladies—and even compared with other energetic New Dealers—Eleanor Roosevelt maintained an exceptionally active travel schedule. By 1940 she had used cars, planes, trains, and boats to travel three hundred thousand miles and visit every state except South Dakota. She toured coal mines, schools, work-relief projects, Indian reservations, migrant worker camps, subsistence homesteads, factories, small businesses, and slums around the nation.

Her visits typically were interactive affairs. She would meet people on factory floors, visit their homes, ask and answer questions, and take their concerns and her observations back to the White House. As her close friend Joseph Lash recalled, ER thought “the channels of communication between the people in the White House and the people in the country should . . . be open, lively, and sympathetic.”

From 1936 through 1940, ER dedicated three weeks each spring and fall to a nationwide lecture tour, keeping a pace that challenged younger associates. During the war she broke new ground once again when she flew across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to inspect British communities ravaged by war and to thank American troops.

She traveled simply and without fanfare, refusing police and Secret Service protection. Most Americans remembered the assassination attempt on Franklin D. Roosevelt just before his inauguration in 1933, and ER’s matter-of-fact refusal to be intimidated by such threats gave them comfort and courage.

Indeed, ER took enormous delight in the adventure of travel. In April 1933, she famously slipped from a White House dinner party with the dynamic Amelia Earhart to enjoy a night flight across the skies above Washington, DC, and Baltimore. So pronounced was ER’s endorsement of air travel that one of her Time magazine cover portraits carried the caption “The jet plane with a fringe on top.” Her love of flying reassured Americans that the new mode of transportation was not only glamorous but also safe.
Eleanor Roosevelt as White House Hostess

Eleanor Roosevelt, sociable though she was, did not relish formal entertaining. And entertaining in the White House, the nation’s mansion and the Roosevelts’ home, was largely a formal affair, governed by protocol and law. By tradition, the First Lady, working with the White House social secretary, managed the hundreds of receptions and formal dinners essential to the president’s success. It was the one part of her job that ER dreaded, but she soon learned to make the most of it.

Each year, from November through February, she arranged dinners for the cabinet, Supreme Court, vice president, congressional leadership, and senior diplomats. All members of Congress and the federal judiciary, agency administrators, the entire diplomatic corps, and senior military personnel flocked to the White House for receptions with the president and his senior staff. As she once told a colleague, the social calendar was so jammed that she could not even afford “to have a headache from the middle of December to the end of Lent.”

To expand access to the White House, ER added a dinner for women political journalists barred from the annual dinners of the “stag” Gridiron Club (the White House “Gridiron widows’” party). She scheduled a regular garden reception for women leaders of federal agencies. She also held many less formal dinners, teas, and garden parties to recognize charities, children’s groups, and intriguing individuals of all kinds. When she asked the celebrated African American contralto Marian Anderson to perform a short after-dinner concert for Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House, she made sure to include Anderson’s mother, one of numerous occasions when ER welcomed black Americans into the people’s house. The Roosevelts also invited Washington, DC, public school graduates for an annual tea.

In 1939, when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited the White House, the first British royals to do so, ER arranged both a state dinner and a garden party on the White House lawn to welcome them. During the garden party, ER and FDR introduced key agency heads to the monarchs so the New Dealers might discuss their work. As Farm Security Administrator Will Alexander recalled, when ER introduced him to the king of England, it was “one of the most amazing performances and . . . an indication of where the hearts of President and Mrs. Roosevelt were.”

ER often used intimate, nightly White House dinners to help FDR meet people who she thought would interest him and had trouble getting appointments. When administrators she respected needed to see FDR, she took care to seat them next to the president at dinner, where, as Democratic Party official Molly Dewson noted, “The problem was solved before we finished the soup.”

Above: Eleanor Roosevelt with an American sailor at the Coco Solo Hospital in the Panama Canal Zone (then a U.S. territory), March 22, 1944. ER did conduct the traditional White House social schedule, but she was better known for meeting ordinary people in locations around the country and the globe. FDR.

Left: Franklin D. Roosevelt talks with England’s King George VI while Eleanor Roosevelt converses with Queen Elizabeth at Union Station in Washington, DC, June 8, 1939. After touring Canada, the pair had arrived by train in the nation’s capital—the first-ever trip to the United States by any British royals. ER threw both a state dinner and a less formal garden party, where she could introduce the king and queen to New Deal administrators. FDR.

Left: Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House, early 1930s. Although she did not relish the role of hostess, ER did enjoy opening the White House to new groups, from public school students in Washington, DC, to female journalists to the African American contralto Marian Anderson. LOC.