18. Defining a Humane World: *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Eleanor Roosevelt had planned, in the spring of 1945, to ride a train with her husband across the country to San Francisco, where President Franklin D. Roosevelt would welcome delegates assembled from far and wide to draft the United Nations Charter. ER very much looked forward to the trip. She had followed FDR’s plans for the United Nations (UN) closely and shared his hope that, with full American participation and the commitment of the Allied nations, the organization could prevent another world war and bring FDR’s Four Freedoms to fruition around the world. She believed strongly that if the world was ever to be free from fear and want, the UN must succeed.

ER never expected to be a member of the American delegation to the UN, much less to contribute as significantly as she did to its success. She simply planned to use her column, lecture tours, and books to rally American support for the international organization. She saw herself as an advocate, not a policy maker.

The year 1945 would bring many surprises. FDR died in April, just weeks before the San Francisco Conference convened to found the UN. By December his successor, Harry Truman, found his popular support plummeting, with rivals in all parties challenging his leadership. ER had begun to join in this criticism, and Truman wanted her in his camp. He asked his confidant James Byrnes to find a way to bring the former First Lady into his administration. Byrnes’s suggestion: Why not appoint her a delegate to the UN? Her status as FDR’s widow could inspire the delegates and win back public support, Byrnes thought. Truman thought it a strategic, albeit controversial, move.

“I want to thank you very much for the opportunity you have given me in being part of this delegation,” ER wrote the president in January 1946, during the first meeting of the UN in London. “It is a great privilege and my only fear is that I shall not be able to make enough of a contribution. I do feel, however, that you were very wise in thinking that anyone connected with my husband could, perhaps, by their presence here keep the level of his ideals.”

Neither Truman nor Byrnes nor ER herself imagined her appointment would prove to be a political and diplomatic masterstroke. Certainly no one anticipated that ER’s eight-year tenure with the UN would include taking a lead role—probably the lead role—in creating one of the most important documents of the twentieth century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
Her Voice Would Not Be Silent

A week after Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death, as Eleanor Roosevelt prepared to leave the White House for good, she wrote her trusted friend Lorena Hickok: “Franklin’s death ended a period in history and now in its wake for lots of us who lived in his shadow periods come and we have to start again under our own momentum and wonder what we can achieve.”

She spent the summer of 1945 in Hyde Park, New York, settling FDR’s estate and considering what she could do to promote the values she and FDR had championed. She followed San Francisco’s conference to plan the United Nations with eager diligence, speaking with delegates over the phone and regularly corresponding with Secretary of State Edward Stettinius.

ER rejected pleas that she run for office, serve in the cabinet, or direct a political action committee. After years of speaking for her husband and his administration, ER wanted to speak her “own mind.” When a concerned Harold Ickes, FDR’s interior secretary and a frequent political ally of ER’s, urged her to enter the political arena, she tempered her dismissal by assuring him that her “voice would not be silent.”

ER spent the fall traveling the nation, urging war–weary Americans to realize that “it takes just as much determination to work for peace as it does to win a war.” Repeatedly she challenged audiences “to have the courage and the strength to sustain [America’s] effort to win the peace.” She used her column My Day to rally support for a living wage, full employment, affordable housing, and an end to segregation. She campaigned for candidates and joined the boards of directors of civil rights and other social–change organizations.

By December 1945, ER had returned to the national stage. On December 21, she reluctantly accepted President Harry Truman’s request that she join the first American delegation to the United Nations. Ten days later she sailed to London to participate in the first session of the UN General Assembly.

“To Build a Peaceful World”: My Day, by Eleanor Roosevelt

WASHINGTON, Monday—When you have lived for a long time in close contact with the loss and grief which today pervades the world, any personal sorrow seems to be lost in the general sadness of humanity. For a long time, all hearts have been heavy for every serviceman sacrificed in the war. There is only one way in which those of us who live can repay the dead who have given their utmost for the cause of liberty and justice. They died in the hope that, thru their sacrifice, an enduring peace would be built and a more just world would emerge for humanity.

While my husband was in Albany and for some years after coming to Washington, his chief interest was in seeing that the average human being was given a fairer chance for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” That was what made him always interested in the problems of minority groups and of any group which was at a disadvantage.

As the war clouds gathered and the inevitable involvement of this country became more evident, his objective was always to deal with the problems of the war, political and military, so that eventually an organization might be built to prevent future wars.

Any man in public life is bound, in the course of years, to create certain enemies. But when he is gone, his main objectives stand out clearly and one may hope that a spirit of unity may arouse the people and their leaders to a complete understanding of his objectives and a determination to achieve those objectives themselves.

Abraham Lincoln was taken from us before he had achieved unity within the nation, and his people failed him. This divided us as a nation for many years.

Woodrow Wilson was also stricken and, in that instance, the peoples of the world failed to carry out his vision.

Perhaps, in his wisdom, the Almighty is trying to show us that a leader may chart the way, may point out the road to lasting peace, but that many leaders and many peoples must do the building. It cannot be the work of one man, nor can the responsibility be laid upon his shoulders, and so, when the time comes for peoples to assume the burden more fully, he is given rest.

God grant that we may have the wisdom and courage to build a peaceful world with justice and opportunity for all peoples the world over.

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And now I want to say one personal word of gratitude to the many people who have sent messages of affection and condolence during these last days. My children and I are deeply grateful. I want to say too that the people who waited in the stations and along the railroad to pay their last respects have my deep appreciation.

“And now there abideth these three—faith, hope, charity, but the greatest of these is charity.”

E.R.
Joining Committee Three

One morning in January 1945, as Eleanor Roosevelt strolled the ocean liner Queen Elizabeth’s main deck on her way to London and the first meeting of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, John Foster Dulles rushed to join her. Dulles, a Republican lawyer and political advisor, had strongly opposed ER’s appointment to the UN delegation and conspired with other delegates to assign ER a position “where she could do the least damage.”

As he joined ER on her walk, he told her that she would serve on “Committee Three” of the UN General Assembly—the Committee for Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Concerns. Fully aware that her fellow delegates had picked their own assignments and that they had sent Dulles to contain her, she simply asked that “all the appropriate material be sent to [her] stateroom.”

Dulles underestimated ER and undervalued Committee Three. He and his counterparts focused on UN Security Council issues: veto power, UN membership, and regulation of atomic energy. He did not anticipate the major international issues that would fall to Committee Three—the plight of refugees and displaced persons, relief and rehabilitation of war-ruined communities, the drafting of international accords on human rights, and intense Cold War battles over how to handle the return of dislocated populations to their countries of origin.

ER would be a principal in work on all four of these matters. As a member of Committee Three, she would deftly refute the claims of a skilled Soviet representative that the war-displaced people of Europe were largely Axis collaborators who should be forcibly repatriated. She would help create the International Refugee Organization, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). She would make her greatest and most unexpected contribution to Committee Three as chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR).

Within a few months, Dulles realized he had miscalculated. After ER convinced the General Assembly to reject a Soviet motion that would have forced many refugees to return to states run by dreaded despotic regimes, Dulles apologized to her. As they left the UN chamber, he confessed that he had thought it “perfectly awful” when she was appointed, but now he had to admit that her work had been “perfectly fine.”

As for ER, she would later write that she had understood the pressure she faced as the only woman in the American delegation. Determined to be well prepared, she pored over reams of documents, which left her better informed than others about the refugee situation. “State Department papers can be dull,” she wrote. “And I used to go almost to sleep over them. But I did read them all.”
Drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Charter of the United Nations, signed in San Francisco in 1945, had proclaimed the United Nations’ (UN) commitment “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” Although it encouraged “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,” the charter did not spell out what those rights and freedoms were. Instead, the UN charged its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with defining rights and developing support for them. ECOSOC delegated that responsibility to Committee Three.

In May 1946, a small segment of Committee Three gathered at New York’s Hunter College to begin that task, and they promptly elected Eleanor Roosevelt chair. This eighteen-member subcommittee—which did not agree on private property; religion; the purpose of government; the role of citizens; or the right to wages, the vote, a nationality, or free travel, among other critical issues—ultimately decided that the first task it should undertake would be to draft an international bill of human rights.

When the committee, now known as the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), convened in January 1947, it again turned to ER to guide it. To draft a declaration of universal rights was a daunting task. No international statement of its type had ever been attempted. Everyone within the UN as well as outside observers understood how difficult it would be. One advisor summarized the UNCHR’s precarious balancing act this way: “Yes, we agree about the rights but on the condition that no one asks us why.” All knew that unless the UNCHR could establish consensus about “the why,” the “whole enterprise could be highjacked.”

ER was very conscious of how much these yet-to-be-defined rights meant to the people of the world. She had toured the squalid refugee camps, met with Holocaust survivors and wounded soldiers and noncombatants, and walked the streets of battle-scarred cities and villages. The people she met and the scenes she saw haunted her. “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?” she asked. ER told her fellow commissioners that she felt “very keenly the importance of this commission.” She urged her fellow delegates to see themselves as representing “the peoples of the world” rather than their own governments and to advocate, when necessary, positions “that it may be difficult for one’s own government to carry through.”

The UNCHR then asked ER, P. C. Chang (China), and Charles Malik (Lebanon) to draft an international bill of rights it could review when it reconvened in December. When the French and the Soviets objected to such a small group preparing the important draft, ER used her authority as chair to add René Cassin (France), Colonel William Roy Hodgson (Australia), Hernán Santa Cruz
The UN Commission on Human Rights assigned a small committee (including Eleanor Roosevelt) to draft an international bill of rights for consideration by the larger body. Here, on June 9, 1947, the drafting committee meets to review a blueprint by Canadian John Humphrey, who had studied materials on human rights submitted by leading philosophers, nongovernmental organizations, and lawyers.

This committee met on June 9, 1947, to study a blueprint prepared by John Humphrey, a Canadian who headed the newly established UN Human Rights Division. Humphrey had reviewed materials on human rights submitted by leading philosophers, nongovernmental organizations, and lawyers. The drafting committee debated Humphrey’s approach and gave ER, Cassin, Malik, and Wilson the responsibility of revising Humphrey’s draft.

When the UNCHR reconvened in Geneva in December 1947, it quickly became apparent to ER how difficult it would be to adopt a legally binding human rights document. Fearful that Cold War politics and countless delays would prevent the adoption of an international bill of rights, ER urged the UNCHR to adopt a three-track process: drafting a declaration of human rights, drafting a legally binding covenant on human rights, and designing a human rights court. This was a shrewd maneuver, as it would take nineteen years to draft the legally binding conventions and another nine to implement them.

But debates over what to include in a “universal” declaration only intensified. Many of the Western nations worried that guaranteeing social and economic rights (the right to work, a living wage, food, shelter, health, and education) would require countries to adopt “socialist” policies. Many Americans objected to clauses opposing segregation. The Soviet bloc opposed political and civil rights (the right to vote, the right to political dissent, the right to speak and assemble, and the right to worship). ER convened a new drafting committee to address the questions they raised: Cassin of France, Carlos Romulo of the Philippines, and Aleksandr Bogomolov, Soviet ambassador to France. Under her leadership, Cassin drafted a declaration they all edited and presented to the UNCHR for approval.

By the summer of 1948, ER had met with each of the commission delegates separately, frequently inviting them to tea or dinner as she’d so often done in the White House. She had helped them resolve their distrust of one another and had pushed the U.S. State Department to accept that social and economic rights must be included for the proposed declaration to have any moral and legal weight. She had chaired hundreds of full commission meetings where delegates debated religion, racial discrimination, the purpose of government, whether women and children should have their own legal identity—and even the placement of commas in their statement.

After more than three thousand hours of meetings, the UNCHR voted to submit its Declaration of Human Rights to Committee Three and the General Assembly.
“I Drove Them Hard”

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly reconvened in Paris in the fall of 1948. The year had seen a Hindu nationalist assassinate Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi and Jewish extremists kill UN Special Envoy Count Folke Bernadotte in Jerusalem for his proposal on dividing Palestine between Jews and Arabs. The crisis over Palestine was intensifying, a blockade governed Berlin, and Chinese communists were poised to take control of the world’s largest nation. Soviet opposition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights threatened to derail its adoption.

Eleanor Roosevelt entered the session determined not to let that happen. The day before the General Assembly convened, she gave a major address at the Sorbonne (in French). “I have come this evening,” she told an overflowing crowd of 2,500, “to talk with you about one of the greatest issues of our time—that is the preservation of human freedom.” After discussing differences in the conception of human rights, she argued that those committed to the declaration’s principles “must not be deluded by the efforts of the forces of reaction to prostitute the great words of our free tradition and thereby to confuse the struggle.”

Her speech set the tone for her work shepherding the declaration through the full Committee Three and the General Assembly. The task was nothing short of grueling. It entailed eighty-five committee meetings (many lasting from early morning until after midnight) in which delegates revisited every word in each of the declaration’s thirty articles.

As debates over the right to social security and education dragged along, ER grew increasingly concerned that Committee Three would not approve the proposed declaration in time for the General Assembly to vote on it. She used My Day to chastise Soviet delaying tactics, remarking acidly, “One would admire the Soviet persistence in sticking to their point if it were not for the fact that so often their point is not worth sticking to.” She also challenged the Soviets in committee meetings. In My Day, she told the story of how one Soviet delegate used the presentation of proposed amendments to hold forth “on the perfections of their way of doing things as opposed to the bad customs and ideas of the United Kingdom and the United States,” so ER bluntly asked if “those in the USSR’s forced labor camps enjoyed paid vacations.”

Her combination of public pressure, blunt confrontation within the committee, and respectful private conversations worked. Committee Three approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A little after midnight on December 10, 1948, ER told the General Assembly why she wanted its members to approve the declaration. The delegates passed it without a single dissenting vote. (The Soviets abstained.) After the vote was tallied, the president of the General Assembly declared: “It is particularly fitting that there should be present on this occasion the person who, with the assistance of many others, has played a leading role in the work, a person who has raised to greater heights even so great a name—Mrs. Roosevelt, the representative of the United States of America.”

The delegates rose and applauded, honoring ER with the first standing ovation in the history of the UN. “I drove them hard,” she wrote to a friend after the commission adjourned, “but they are glad now it’s over and all the men are proud of their Eleanor with René Cassin at the U.N. accomplishment.”

In its Declaration of Human Rights, the international body had laid out, for the first time, the basic rights of every single human being on Earth—including the right to be seen as a free and equal person before the law; to be free from torture, slavery, and arbitrary arrest; to own property, start a family, access education, and work for a living; and to express oneself, assemble as one chooses, and follow one’s own conscience in matters of religion.
18. Defining a Humane World: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

IV. Statesman & Commander in Chief: FDR in World War II

Eleanor Roosevelt Defines Human Rights

In 1958, as activists celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the press asked Eleanor Roosevelt what human rights meant. She replied: "Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: The neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."