The First Lady's Vision

Women in Wartime America through Eleanor Roosevelt's Eyes

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Daria K. Janssen

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by

DARIA K. JANSSEN

has been approved for

the Department of History

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

______________________________

Katherine Jellison

Associate Professor of History

______________________________

Benjamin M. Ogles

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

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Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) fused seemingly contradictory aspects of her life, her thinking and her personality together. Through research on Eleanor Roosevelt's life and analysis of her opinions on women at work and women in the military during the Second World War, this thesis argues that Eleanor Roosevelt played an important role as a feminist thinker. Her marriage to Franklin D. Roosevelt provided her with disappointments but also with opportunities as a social activist and a politician. Material in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers show that in her view, women had to step out of the limited sphere of the home and be able to work for equal wages or even join the military services. She challenged the existing conservative gender ideology of American society. Coupled with her own choice to fight for the greater good of American society, Eleanor Roosevelt became a First Lady of formidable political stature.

Approved: ________________________________

Katherine Jellison

Associate Professor of History
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new kind of First Lady</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradiction - Victorian upbringing / Feminist</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradiction - Married life / Female companionship</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradiction - Politician's forcefulness / Feminine modesty</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradiction - Idealist / Realist</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special psychological characteristics</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence as a First Lady</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Roosevelt's use of the Media</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Roosevelt's vision</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate spheres</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Deal for women</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Office of Civilian Defense</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: James McNeill Whistler: Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother.................................................................31

Figure 2: Eleanor Roosevelt in an advertisement to promote air travel among women........47

Figure 3: ER visited the Packard Motor Car Company in connection with her study of women in war industry.........................................................66

Figure 4: Photograph illustrating the article "Woman's place after the War.".....................76

Figure 5: Male sailor and two WAVES, on board USS Uhlmann.................................87

Figure 6: Oveta Culp Hobby talks with Auxiliary Margaret Peterson and Elizabeth Gilbert at Mitchel Field...............................................................92

Figure 7: Auxiliaries Ruth Wade and Lucille Mayo further demonstrate their ability to service trucks as taught them during the processing period at Fort Des Moines and put into practice at Fort Huachuca, Arizona..............................................................95

Figure 8: Eleanor Roosevelt in Australia...............................................................99
INTRODUCTION

As a reaction to the desperation of the Great Depression after the stock market crash in 1929, Americans elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) as President in 1932. He and his wife Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) proved to be an instrumental presence in the White House for many years to come. Upon arriving at the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) had already been pivotal in the women's movement in New York and in workers' unions. She had witnessed the addition of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and she became part of the group of women who carried the ideals of the Progressive Era women's rights movement into the mid-twentieth century. Her years as the wartime First Lady were particularly crucial in providing continuity between the Progressive Era feminism of the 1910s and the 1920s and the so-called "second wave" feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

In discussing ER's role as a bridge figure between first- and second-wave feminism, the first chapter of the thesis will examine the characteristics that made her an effective politician. ER's modest way of presenting herself and her reluctance to be the First Lady hid the fact that she was a savvy political being. The feminine cover with which she cloaked her liberal views made her more appealing and, therefore, more effective in the predominantly male environment of the public realm. ER used that position for many different purposes. This thesis focuses on her views on women's issues and gender equality, a significant part of her beliefs because women were very important in her personal life. Her dependence on
female emotional support stood in contrast to her public image of being the President's loyal and loving wife.

Chapter Two examines ER's views on women's contribution to the war home front effort of the Second World War (WWII). While the separation between the male public sphere and the female private sphere supposedly governed American society, ER encouraged women to cross that division as wage workers in the war factories and in other wartime pursuits. ER made sure she herself was highly visible in the home front activities, most notably as the co-director of the Office of Civilian Defense. In order for women to be able to make the transition into home front service, ER believed that reforms such as day care centers and better housing were necessary for women and their families.

The third chapter argues that ER went even further in her campaign for women's equality by promoting a new phenomenon in the American armed services: women in the military. Women were not completely alien to warfare in American history, but the establishment of female units in WWII was a novel occurrence. ER did not go so far as to expect those units to be sent to the front. As will be explained in this chapter, history had defined citizenship differently for men than for women. It was a man's responsibility to bear arms and fight. But her efforts ensured that women would have the opportunity to carry the same rights and responsibilities of citizenship as men away from the battle lines. In addition to advocating women's service in the armed forces, ER initiated a discussion on a labor draft for young women that was parallel to the military draft for men. Any resemblance to military conscription elicited great disapproval, but the services to the community that she hoped women would perform, would - she believed - teach them discipline and a better sense of
citizenship. Emphasizing women's strengths instead of their weaknesses, she constantly delivered a progressive message to the American people.

ER would not have called herself a feminist; she thought that the term could not be applied to her because she did not want to separate the two sexes from each other. She, however, recognized women as special beings who deserved equal opportunities with men. This thesis will argue against ER's own perception of herself and argue that she was a feminist. Her feminism was well hidden in her overarching belief in human rights, but that did not make it insignificant. Throughout all of her work ran a vein of feminist ideology.

ER's objection to the Equal Rights Amendment seemingly contradicted her commitment to gender equality and had many feminists question her ideology. Nevertheless, evidence presented in this thesis indicates that she was a feminist. ER's call for the appointment of women in government position, equal wages and women in the military was revolutionary. Within the American political context, her views challenged the status quo and were therefore progressive in this political spectrum.

Chapter One shows that her woman-ness was very important in her efforts as a politician, and the second and third chapter exemplify how devoted ER was to women's rights in American society during WWII. She constantly challenged the limits that were set for women, and her own remarkable life was an excellent example of a woman's possibilities. She showed her fellow contemporary women how to make her own choices in life and built a career separate from her husband. ER's insistence on women's equal citizenship, worth and responsibility inspired others to feel free as individuals in an economic and social way.

Without hostility towards men as an 'oppressing' group, ER believed that women could step outside their "proper place" at the home, most importantly as wage earners. She
participated in organizations such as women's trade unions and within the Democratic Party because she believe the government had an important role to play in creating the circumstances for women to be able to compete with men and be protected for their female responsibilities such as motherhood. This attitude ran parallel with Franklin D. Roosevelt's (FDR) New Deal policy to create governmental regulatory agencies. WWII created many new opportunities for women on the job market that ER endorsed actively, even when after the war conservative gendered work patterns returned.

First, Chapter One will examine ER's life and her development as a social activist, based on several contradicting characteristics and circumstances.
CHAPTER 1

A new kind of First Lady

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was called "First Lady of the World." President Harry S. Truman referred to her with this honorary title in tribute to her human rights achievements during his presidency, but he was not the first to do so. In 1943 a Brazilian aviatrix, Anesia Pinheiro Machado, referred to ER in this way during a radio broadcast to Latin America.\(^1\) The epithet First Lady of the World is not well defined, just as the office of First Lady in the White House is an honorary but imprecise position. ER became First Lady by marriage, while the President achieved this position through democratic elections. Eleanor Roosevelt was fortunate enough to follow her husband Franklin D. Roosevelt into the Presidential manor in 1933 and lived there for 12 years until his death in 1945. Her tenure as First Lady was longer than anyone before or since. During this period, ER worked very hard as a confidante to, and a representative of, the President because his paralysis limited him in his movements. In this sense ER was an involved partner in the White House. In addition to this role, ER expanded her responsibilities far beyond the executive mansion.

In the course of her life, ER became a leading figure on the issue of women's emancipation. Well before her life in the White House she was active in the Democratic Party and women's labor unions such as the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the

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International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). During the Second World War (WWII) she became co-chair of the national committee on Civilian Defense and advocated for women's participation in the war effort. She incorporated these issues into a wider range of social and political concerns such as civil rights, human rights, youth and democracy. Although ER was well known for these other causes as well, this thesis will predominantly look at her thoughts on gender. ER targeted reform goals, such as women's emancipation, and used her position as governor's wife and First Lady and her own ingenuity to pursue them. She made an enormous and long lasting impact through speeches, books, articles, columns and her extensive traveling, both in the U.S. and around the world.

Above all, ER was a hard worker. With the help of her personal secretary and friend Malvina 'Tommy' Thompson, she managed her enormous responsibilities. ER surrounded herself with family and close friends such as Malvina Thompson at her home Val-Kill at Hyde Park, New York. To them, ER was a woman who showed great dedication to her work but also to her family. Her grandson David B. Roosevelt wrote a biography about his famous grandmère, in which he described her as a strong, determined person with a nurturing nature that touched those beyond her closest family circle. She had the ability to "believe … in the innate goodness of humanity." In the eyes of David Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt was a mother, grandmother, and, in her instinct to fight for the betterment of humanity, also a grandmother to the world.

2 “Question: What political and professional activities did Eleanor Roosevelt engage in while FDR was governor?,” http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/ger/q-and-a/q16.cfm.
The family background of the Roosevelts was very important to ER. The first ancestor to move to the U.S. was Claes Martenzen van Rosenvelt, settling in New York (New Amsterdam at the time) in 1647. Claes’ grandsons Johannes and Jacobus became the founders of the two famous Roosevelt branches: the Oyster Bay and the Hyde Park sides of the family. President Theodore Roosevelt and ER descended from Johannes’s line at Oyster Bay. FDR traced his family back to Jacobus. The family’s Dutch heritage remained strong. The family spoke Dutch until the mid-eighteenth century, and it was also in the seventeenth century that both families acquired large estates along the Hudson River. Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library indicate that three hundred years later ER had a good relationship with the Dutch royal family.4

ER was born in 1884 and was reared in the conservative Victorian style. Her parents moved in elite social circles, but it was not a happy family environment for little Eleanor. She was a solemn and serious child, which elicited her mother's teasing. In the eyes of Anna Livingston Ludlow Hall Roosevelt, a very beautiful and fashionable woman, manners were more important than feelings. She believed ER’s social success was doomed because the girl was not pretty enough. This attitude shattered ER’s confidence from her earliest years. Anna Hall Roosevelt died when ER was eight years old. From ER's perspective it was her father, Elliott Roosevelt, who provided the love little Eleanor longed for. In later years she would remember the times with her father as perfectly happy and characterized him as an opposite to her mother. But that security fell away as well when Elliott Roosevelt became increasingly

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4 Ibid., 34-37.
wild and emotionally abusive due to alcoholism (from which ER was shielded) and died in 1894, only two years after his wife passed away.⁵

A pivotal development in ER's life was her stay in England as a teenager. She spent three years at Allenswood Academy (1899-1902), a private school for young women outside of London, under the care of Marie Souvestre. The school had a good reputation among wealthy liberals and provided a feminist and progressive environment for these young women in the late nineteenth century. Not only did ER receive an excellent and stimulating education, she also became a confident young lady. The girls had to speak French, which was no problem for ER, who was bilingual. This boosted her self esteem and as a result the hunch to hide her above average height disappeared. She studied very hard and became close to Madame Souvestre. Together they traveled in Europe, and ER acquired a lifelong love for traveling. She returned to the US with an independent mind, self-assured and better prepared to act in the public arena that men still dominated.⁶

Soon ER began to be courted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, her fifth cousin once removed. The few surviving letters between the couple show real dedication and love, and they became engaged quickly.⁷ Sara Delano Roosevelt, FDR's mother, insisted on playing a central role in his life. She insisted that the engagement was kept secret for over a year. Demands like this caused ER never to feel at home at the Delano Roosevelt Hyde Park mansion. The marriage took place in 1905, and launched a ten year period of primarily domestic life for ER that would include the birth of six children.

⁶ Ibid., 102-107.
⁷ Ibid., 149-150. ER destroyed all of FDR's courtship letters.
The marriage was not easy but was never broken. The relationship between husband and wife took a sharp turn in 1918. It was a defining moment when ER discovered that her husband had been having an affair with her former social secretary Lucy Mercer. The romantic aspect of her marriage ceased to exist, but her husband’s political ambitions made divorce impossible. They stayed together and established a completely new relationship. They forged a political alliance and aided each other in their political endeavors. When FDR became paralyzed in 1921, ER became in many respects his representative to the outside world when, for example, he was unable to travel. His political career had already taken off. In 1910 he was elected to the New York State Senate, he appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson in 1913. But the paralysis did not stop him; he was elected governor of New York State in 1928, then four years later as President of the United States.

Being the wife of an successful politician brought many possibilities, but ER had always been careful not to inhibit or contradict her husband's objectives, and set careful parameters for her conduct. The circles that Eleanor was raised in cast her in the role of helpmate wife. This position should have placed her outside of the political arena. However, ER decided otherwise and found a middle ground between domesticity and politics. As FDR's star began to rise in New York, she stood by him and was of real help. But she also made choices of her own. It was in the decade of the 1910s that she acquired managerial skills, administrative skills and political insight into governmental issues by working in the

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8 Recently, the original diagnosis of paralytic poliomyelitis (polio) is being contested. After a reevaluation of the diagnosis, researchers find that his age and many features of the illness are more consistent with a diagnosis of Guillain–Barré syndrome, an autoimmune polyneuritis. Armons S. Goldman, “What was the cause of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s paralytic illness?,” *Journal of Medical Biography* 11 (2003): 232-240

Democratic Party system. Throughout her life, ER would put these skills into practice with an extraordinary energy.

The day that FDR was elected, November 8, 1932, ER was happy for her husband but feared the responsibilities that she would have to bear as manager of the White House household. Lorena Hickok, a journalist and friend with whom ER possibly had an amorous relationship, quoted ER in her 1962 book *Eleanor Roosevelt, Reluctant First Lady* as saying after the 1932 presidential elections: "For him, of course, I'm glad--sincerely. I could not have wanted it any other way. After all I'm a Democrat, too. Now I shall have to work out my own salvation. I'm afraid it may be a little difficult. I know what Washington is like, I've lived there." Immediately the national spotlight moved to follow ER, and she had to make changes in her life that she resisted strongly. When somebody pointed out to her that now she would be First Lady, she made the famous statement: "But there isn't going to be any First Lady. There is just going to be plain, ordinary Mrs. Roosevelt. And that's all." The idea of “plain, ordinary Mrs. Roosevelt” caught on and made her even more popular. Nevertheless, she had to adapt. It was, for example, impossible to continue teaching at Todhunter College, the Manhattan girls' school she served as vice-principal and co-owned with her close friends Marian Dickerman and Nancy Cook, with whom she lived at Val-Kill.

ER never told her husband of the deep doubts she had harbored about his chances to become President. As her husband's Presidential ambitions were on the verge of

becoming reality, she wrote a letter to Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook in which she voiced her fear that she was going to be a "prisoner of protocol and tradition" in the White House. In an interview with ER's biographer Joseph P. Lash, Dickerman remembered that when longtime Roosevelt aide Louis Howe saw the letter, he ripped it to shreds and warned Dickerman and Cook never to breathe word of the letter to any one.¹³ Once in the White House, at the age of forty-eight, ER took up all the usual responsibilities as a hostess but extended her interests beyond this traditional role.

There was one specific tool that ER used to approach the goal of the advancement of women in U.S. society. ER was the first to organize press conferences as a First Lady. She held her first conference on March 5, 1933, two days after the inauguration of FDR, and held the last one a few hours before his death on April 12, 1945. The press conferences were special for another reason too: only female reporters were allowed to ask questions. Through this medium ER connected to the nation's female audience. About 20 to 30 reporters, including Lorena Hickok, regularly attended these White House events.¹⁴

She scheduled a total of 348 press conferences over twelve years. ER believed that the topics addressed at the conferences “might be of special interest and value to the women of the country and that the women reporters might write up [sic] better than the men.”¹⁵ Political topics were avoided; instead she spoke about her engagements, a luncheon she had been to, clothing, special visitors or her observations on war and peace. ER invited other women, from both inside and outside the administration, to talk to the reporters as well. For

¹⁵ Ibid., 1. As quoted from ER, *This I Remember*, 102.
example, on February 24, 1943, Madame Chiang Kai-chek visited and answered questions about American aid to the Chinese war effort. One reporter also asked about Madame Chiang’s efforts to achieve something similar to the Equal Rights Amendment in China. Madame Chiang Kai-chek answered that “since men expect us to bear over half of the responsibility it is up to them to give us equal privileges. I have never known brains to have any sex.”

Historian Maurine Beasley reconstructed 87 press conferences through the notes of several participating reporters. The topics ER addressed at her press conferences were diverse. For example, on April 17, 1942, she discussed that week’s social engagements and gave suggestions to young women about what to do during the war without their men around. On the same day, ER also responded to the criticism from New York State American Legion commander Jacob Ark regarding a speech she had given about the problems that returning veterans could run into as a group. The distinctly female topics she discussed were women sewing their own clothes at home, women working for the government, victory gardens at the White House, and her New York apartment. The press conferences functioned as encouragement for all the American women who were dealing with difficulties that the war had caused. Male reporters and the predominantly male Washington press corps would not have paid so much attention to her "female" topics. ER spanned the bridge between the “mainstream” male press, the White House, and the female press. The female reporters were very loyal, eager to attend and sometimes provided with a news scoop.

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16 Ibid., 327.
17 Ibid., 279-284.
Contradiction - Victorian upbringing / Feminist

An analysis of ER's political convictions (especially on gender issues) is necessarily paired with discussion of her personal characteristics. The personal life of a person is often seen by historians as intertwined with his or her political convictions. As civil rights activists in the late 1960s noted, "the personal is political." ER's life is particularly intriguing because she went through significant changes in her personal life and grew into a remarkable politician. She fused seemingly contradictory aspects of her life, her thinking and her personality together.

ER reinvented herself from the conservative Victorian she grew up as into a political activist. Both lines of the Roosevelt family were deeply rooted in their Victorian backgrounds. ER was raised in an environment where it was believed that women had a "proper place." The shift from being a conservative elite lady to a progressive minded politician was gradual and never a black-and-white transformation. At several moments in ER's life there was a change that facilitated steps towards social activism. Most importantly, there was her stay at Allenswood Academy with the liberal Marie Souvestre. Here she learned to think for herself and present herself as an independent individual. That independence was, however, hemmed in by her marriage to FDR three years later. A second watershed moment was the discovery of her husband’s love affair with Lucy Mercer. A divorce was not possible and the intimate part of their marriage discontinued. The event was

an enormous blow to ER and she had to redefine herself anew as a more self-reliant person.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, she always supported her husband in public, and they were a formidable political team. It was not until FDR’s passing away in 1945 that the former White House resident was completely free to choose her own way. In both instances a greater freedom was the result of a move away from the most important man in her life, her husband. In the Victorian tradition, this push would be counterintuitive.

ER’s support for women’s issues conflicted with her Victorian background as well. From 1920 on she steadily supported the suffrage movement and other emancipatory causes. She attributed more power to women than many of her contemporaries would, pushing women to step out of the strictly private sphere of the household. But ER was never a radical feminist. She believed in the family structure and recognized that men and women had different roles in society. The way she approached the role of women in the war effort during WWII reflected such convictions. And it was not until the 1970s that scholarship began to recognize her as one of the great female activists, along with Jane Addams, Carrie Chapman Catt and Lillian Wald. ER’s own self-depreciation added to the lack of attention. She always discounted her own influence. Subsequent literature followed her self-admitted story of inadequacy, helplessness and duty to her husband, children and grandchildren.\textsuperscript{20} Clearly she placed herself into a traditional feminine role, while at heart she was a feminist.

\textsuperscript{19} Cook, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt. Volume I}, 245.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 9-10.
Contradiction - Married life / Female companionship

There was a major dichotomy between ER’s life as the President’s wife and her personal network of friends. The relationships ER had with female friends counterbalanced her marital life, and it was important that she did find such a balance. First we have to understand more about the Roosevelt marriage. The marriage with FDR had started romantically, and it was a great disappointment to ER when that was not the case any more. She would have accepted a divorce. FDR and more importantly his mother, however, did not accept this. He was already Assistant Secretary of the Navy and his public image mattered too much to his career. And although ER was severely depressed for some time, they did care for each other very much and they did not drift apart entirely. FDR would not tolerate anybody making negative remarks about his wife, and vice versa. They both tried very diligently to recapture some of the old joys in their relationship. It is hard to recover what exactly had been agreed upon when they decided to remain married, but they were loyal to each other.21

ER was an active woman who defined her own life to a high degree, but her marriage to FDR defined her as well. In some regards she was his helpmate wife. At Hyde Park, Sara Delano Roosevelt reigned at the family mansion but when, for example, the couple lived in Albany, New York, during FDR's years as the governor of New York, ER was in charge of the household and receiving guests. She always campaigned with him and for him as governor and President. He was the father of her children. The Roosevelts shared many political convictions as Democrats and as promoters of the New Deal. Thanks to him, she came to live in the White House at a time when it was difficult for women to get elected to

21 Ibid., 231-232.
any office. Women had only just received the right to vote in 1920. This greatly promoted her won career, however - parties established women's divisions.

ER was a married woman and she had responsibilities as a wife and mother. She always remained loyal and assured FDR her work was all for him; she saw herself as a stand-in who acted in his best interest. When FDR praised his wife for her successful activities as finance chair of the Democratic Party's Women's Division at a conference, she rejected the compliment: "You need not be proud of me dear. I'm only being active till you can be again. It isn't such a great desire on my part to serve the world and I'll fall back into habits of sloth quite easily! Hurry up for as you know my ever present sense of uselessness of all things will overwhelm me sooner or later! … Devotedly, ER." Such writing is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is difficult to imagine ER as a lazy person. Second, FDR taking over ER's activities as a women's social activist would certainly be a memorable sight.22

There were tensions that existed in the marriage as well. Both families were wealthy, so ER had an income from a trust fund, but FDR had a higher steady income from his family, his work and other activities. Until the late 1920s, ER depended on her husband to pay the family expenses. It was difficult for ER to ask for checks, and she decided she wanted to earn her own money. This was a development that grieved Sara Delano Roosevelt. The subsequent improvement in her finances meant that ER was able to pursue causes she believed in. The articles that she wrote and the lectures and radio appearances that she did not only provided her with a platform but also made sure she earned money. She did not spend most of the money she earned on herself but on others, buying presents and donating

22 Ibid., 341, 346.
to good causes. In 1925, she built Val-Kill, a cottage a few miles away from the main house, a place she could call her own with Dickerman and Cook, and where she did not have to answer to Sara Delano Roosevelt any more. FDR had donated the land for the hideaway and designed the cottage.

Blanche Wiesen Cook, women’s historian and a biographer of ER, has written extensively on how women were the ones who provided ER with a solid support network in the 1920s and throughout the rest of her life, as opposed to what her marriage could provide her. ER’s female networks were both personal and political. The wife of an important Democratic politician, ER became part of the group that pulled the New York women’s reform network together. Her close friends were all members of the four major organizations: the WTUL, the League of Women Voters, the Women’s Division of the New York State Democratic Committee, and the Women’s City Club. ER knew all the political activists who participated in these groups and was a driving force within them. It was a combined effort to plan strategy, decide on policy, raise funds, debate, gather information and travel around the state. ER proved to be very effective in all these activities.

Her political connections clearly overlapped with ER’s personal friendships. ER fell into a group of free thinking women with whom she had a strong rapport. She came into contact with women such as Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read, a couple who lived together in Greenwich Village as lifelong partners. Marion Dickerman lived one block away with Nancy Cook, and these two women would later live with ER at Val-Kill from 1925 onward. The three also combined their business endeavors, such as the Todhunter School and a furniture

23 Ibid., 317-318.
24 Ibid., 338-339.
crafts factory at Val-Kill. In the same building as Dickerman and Cook lived Molly Dewson and her partner Polly Porter. ER had introduced Dewson to Democratic politics and they became close friends. All these women had broken free from tradition and were in an ongoing process of questioning “normalcy.” ER thus experienced an environment that resembled Souvestre’s Allenswood, where women behaved as individuals and were not dependent on their husbands.25

These women were very conscious of their gender, an aspect that was a remnant of the Victorian idea of separate spheres and the belief that men and women are fundamentally different. ER’s generation drew strength from a long tradition of religious women’s history and women’s reform societies. In their view, women had a common cause and solidarity. It was, therefore, not surprising that informal friendships merged with connections in public activism. ER combined her commitment to the feminist cause with marriage, but many women obviously chose not to marry and instead lived with other women. Today we would describe such relationships as lesbian, but, for example, Molly Dewson and Polly Porter preferred the word "partners." In this era, "longstanding and intense female relationships were a socially acceptable vehicle to a full personal and professional life without the constraints of marriage and heterosexual convention."26 Most significant was the emotional or social support such female relationships provided; sexual intimacy was perhaps of secondary or no importance. The distinction is not very relevant in assessing the significance of the relationships of ER with these women.

25 Ibid., 296-297.
As was mentioned before, ER was able to conflate her marriage with a life that was built around female friendship, intimacy, love and perhaps even sexuality. In this light, ER’s close relationship with Lorena "Hick" Hickok during the White House years was significant. The hundreds of letters between ER and Hickok that have been preserved in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, reveal an intimate, trusting relationship with some physical aspect to it. The two women exchanged long daily letters; ER sometimes wrote ten to fifteen pages a day to Hick. Certain passages exhibited a deep intimacy. For example, when ER settled in the White House, she arranged her pictures, something she did everywhere she lived. She wrote Hickok: "My pictures are nearly all up & I have you in my sitting room, where I can look at you most of my waking hours! I can't kiss you so I kiss your picture good-night and good-morning. Don't laugh!" 27 The people around ER always respected her privacy. The relationship with Hick, therefore, never made it into the large public historical narrative. It is telling that ER carefully preserved the correspondence with Hick, but burned her love letters to FDR. ER must have been aware of the controversy that this intimate female relationship would cause but also realized its significance in her own life.

After the 1920s when the women's movement had lost its momentum after successfully securing suffrage, this "collective female consciousness" was fading and ER was one of the remarkable women to keep its spirit alive until the 1960s. Assimilation into the male world had become the new ideal. The old suffragists were seen as too "anti-male" by

younger generations. As a result, the powerful female support networks lost their value in providing women with a special awareness of their place in public life.\textsuperscript{28}

**Contradiction - Politician's forcefulness / Feminine modesty**

Through her extraordinary intelligence, ER merged the ability to be modest and at the same time direct. There were many examples of people who were surprised by her unpretentious behavior but also by her direct and straightforward methods to pursue what she believed in. In 1940 ER biographer Ruby Black tried to convince readers in the introduction to her book that ER's story was "full of seeming contradictions" but "wholly true." How was it possible "that a girl afraid to speak her mind to her closest relatives and friends could become a woman who spoke her mind so freely and so vigorously in world affairs that two powerful dictators assailed her opinions and her influence"? That woman had grown out of the shyness and replaced it with a sense of duty and the will to help others. "And she always did what was expected of her, as well as what was not expected."\textsuperscript{29}

An excellent example of her modesty was ER’s appearance on the TV show *What's My Line?* on October 18, 1953. Behind the scenes, the director Franklin Heller was surprised to find ER outside the constantly busy and noisy director’s room, where he had just reprimanded the crowd with a loud "QUIET!", shortly before the former First Lady’s appearance. The show’s producer described the following scene:

\textsuperscript{28} Ware, *Partner and I*, xviii, 146.
\textsuperscript{29} Black, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, ix.
Toward the end of the second occupational spot, Frank turned in his chair to tell Mrs. Roosevelt that she was on next, only to find that she was gone. Leaving the shot-calling temporarily in the hands of the A.D. [Assistant Director], Frank took off his headset, opened the control room door, and stepped out into the hall. There was Eleanor Roosevelt standing quietly all alone.

“Mrs. Roosevelt, for heaven’s sake!” said Frank, “What’s the matter? What are you doing out here?”

“Well, Mr. Heller,” Mrs. Roosevelt explained, “I heard what you said about noise while you were working. I suddenly had this uncontrollable desire to cough, so rather than take a chance at disturbing you, I thought it better that I wait outside.” She was that kind of lady. 30

Once on air, the panelists attempted to guess her profession since she was the mystery guest. When one asked if she was a politician, she gave a somewhat unexpected answer: "No!" It is, however, hard to believe she was not a politician since she participated so effectively in political circles. ER’s successful chairwomanship of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, to name one achievement, reflected her skills as a politician. 31 To appear on What’s My Line? was a political act. ER was certainly not the first politician or movie star to come and plug a cause: United Nation’s Day 1953. The usual fee

for the guests was $500, but an exception was made for ER. Her fee was doubled to $1000 and donated to UNICEF to commemorate United Nation’s Day.\textsuperscript{32}

Eleanor Roosevelt's modesty and her forceful ability to reach the objectives she believed in were not the only contradictory character traits that together made ER a striking person. The visit to the \textit{What's My Line?} studio exemplified ER’s lady-like manners but was in essence the result of her determination to promote a selfless cause. The TV show was one of many ways she tried to spread her message, although ER considered results more important than mere publicity or taking the credit.\textsuperscript{33}

Naturally ER had to be mindful of the press. Her own sizable output of articles and columns counterbalanced the spread of critical comments. But she did this in a rather pragmatic and practical way. The fact that she never ran for office gave ER a certain freedom that would be unimaginable for her most obvious present-day counterpart, Hillary Rodham Clinton. This is not to say that such freedom withheld ER from fighting for distinct causes. On the contrary, she targeted specific ideas and publicized those in her personal appearances and through the media.

In an article entitled "Why I Do Not Choose to Run", published in \textit{Look Magazine}, July, 1946, ER displayed her typical self-effacement. Democrats had urged her to run for office, even suggesting that she run for President of the US, but she always declined. The first argument she presented was that she was “influenced by the thought that no woman ha[d], as yet, been able to build up and hold sufficient backing to carry through a program.” In other words, she was very aware of her gender and the place women occupied in her

\textsuperscript{32} Fates, \textit{What's My Line?}, 44.
\textsuperscript{33} Black, \textit{Casting Her Own Shadow}, 199-200.
society. She did not agree that women should remain in this secondary position because she said that if she were younger, it would have been an “interesting challenge” to fight it. But now, as an elderly woman, she would have to “run … as a junior with no weight of experience in holding office behind [her].” Even though only a year earlier she had ended a twelve year period in the White House, she considered herself “an onlooker in the field of politics.” And although she hoped that she was “occasionally of some help,” it was her friend Louis Howe who “trained [her] and used [her] for the things which he thought [she] could do well, but always in connection with [her] husband’s career.” And now, at the age of sixty-two, she would rather help younger people "who have years in which to achieve their objectives" to run for office. In reality, however, ER found the strength to delay retirement until 1962, the year she died. Her actions told a different story than the version she asserted in publications like this article.34

The letters between ER and Ruby Black, which have been preserved in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers correspondence collection, show a very amiable relationship between the journalist and First Lady. ER and Malvina Thompson fully cooperated with Black’s biography project. Shortly after its publication, Black sent a letter to ER that touched on a number of topics, but there is one passage, which along with ER's reply, shows the disparity between ER's role playing and her actions in reality. Black's conclusion had portrayed the White House resident in extremely positive terms as courageous, loving, gracious, knowledgeable, inspiring, etcetera. Black expected that ER would grow even more after her years as First Lady: "When-in 1941 or thereafter-she is liberated from the restrictions and the duties of the wife of a public official, she is likely to reveal sides of her nature and her ability

which have been suppressed. She will write with much more assurance and definiteness—
more than even her recent development has made possible. She will be more outspoken in
politics, despite her determination never to hold public office.” 35 In retrospect, Black proved
to be right. In her letter to ER, Black characterized it as a "chapter which won't let you
become a counterpart of 'Whistler's mother.'" 36

Figure 1. James McNeill Whistler: Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's
Mother (1871)

As was customary for ER, she answered the lengthy letter with a shorter typed note.
First she started out by complimenting Black on the quality of the biography, confiding that:
"... I was rather shocked to find that so many people thought I was actually responsible for
things which I believe were really mere coincidences or largely done by other people." This

35 Black, Eleanor Roosevelt, 316.
36 Ruby A Black, November 1, 1940, 1, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
disclaimer did not do justice to the how hard she had worked in the previous two decades. To ER, the expectations that Black had set were a challenge. She said:

I confess that sometimes I have a very great desire to become Whistler's Mother, sitting by the fire with a cap and my knitting, but you give me a feeling that as long as there is much that ought to be done, any of us who had any kind of capacity to be of use should keep our shoulders to the wheel as long as we are physically able.\(^\text{37}\)

Implicitly ER recognized that she had been working towards goals that she believed in and was not an idle "onlooker." It was tempting to sit next to the fireplace and retire. On the other hand, however, she would not give in to that desire and would continue doing what she had become famous for.

**Contradiction - Idealist / Realist**

ER was not a woman who had foolish expectations for the causes she advocated. To use the words of John F. Kennedy, she could be characterized as an “idealist without illusions.”\(^\text{38}\) She was able to create a harmony between the vision she had for American society and the obstacles reality would offer. She attributed great importance to grand principles like democracy, freedom from fear and equality. But she was also a pragmatist. That ideology alone would not provide enough leverage was a lesson she learned early on.

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\(^{37}\) Eleanor Roosevelt, November 13, 1940, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.

She became committed to "hands on" action and strove to make practical, concrete steps forward. She would call for setting realistic goals, prioritizing and the delegation of tasks. Her colleagues admired her for the results she would achieve between one meeting and another.\(^{39}\)

As a zealous activist, ER rarely backed away from a fight, but she tried to avoid the polarization of an issue. To quote Allida Black, historian and biographer of ER's political career: "she embraced coalitions and compromise but she always tried to 'compromise up.'"\(^{40}\) The ability to mediate between groups with different interests or views was an extraordinary skill. It made ER a savvy politician with great sway.

Accompanying her pragmatic effectiveness was an idealistic consciousness. She always envisioned a better society or world. The hope she had for the US was embedded in the New Deal ideal and entailed several different aspects. She particularly envisioned a "new order" for women. Her 1933 book *It's Up to the Women* reflected her call for action and reform by and for women. This message was camouflaged by informal advice on menus, household budgets, child rearing and, getting along with one’s husband. At the same time, however, she called for women to take up leadership in the movements for social justice, to join and support trade unions, to enter politics and to set up consumers’ groups to police the National Recovery Administration, the agency established by the National Industry Recovery Act (NRA). In short, the NRA authorized the President to regulate businesses in the interests of promoting fair competition, supporting prices and competition, creating jobs for

\(^{39}\) Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 2, 10.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 203.
the unemployed, and stimulating the United States economy to recover from the Great Depression. ER's book brought a revolutionary message under disguise.\textsuperscript{41}

According to Allida Black, it was during her widowhood that ER often became angry that liberals' reforms did not go far enough or were ineffective. Already during the White House years, she repeatedly used her pen to push for better and more drastic measures. In the process she “helped redirect American politics and redefine American liberalism.” ER's last book, \textit{Tomorrow is Now}, published posthumously in 1963, was her last and strongest appeal to American liberalism. In ER's eyes, Americans had lost vision, the American dream was lost and Americans had become complacent. The Cold War was threatening the nation, but: “We are facing the greatest challenge our way of life has had to meet without any clear understanding of the facts. … One can fight danger only when one is armed with solid facts and spurred on by an unwavering faith and determination.” Older, wiser and more confident, she described what she thought were the biggest unrealized goals in society: racial justice, economic security, quality education, affordable housing, civil liberties, and human rights.\textsuperscript{42}

ER always saw room for improvement, the way she had been able to recover from the hardships in her own life. The death of her parents and the Lucy Mercer affair had set her back, but she had used those events to become stronger. In her view, the Depression of the 1930s had devastated the country, but also provided an opportunity for extraordinary achievements, a chance to set aside selfishness and support the common good. During the


Depression, she believed that New Deal agencies such as the NRA and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) could provide such guidance. The AAA restricted production during the New Deal by paying farmers to reduce crop area. Its purpose was to reduce crop surplus so as to effectively raise the value of crops, thereby giving farmers relative stability again. The government had a role to play, but on an individual level, men and women had an equal responsibility to get the American economy going again. Increasingly disappointed late in life with lukewarm results, she shifted her attention more to an appeal to the public's responsibility. She believed that all Americans had “a social responsibility for individual welfare.”

Special psychological characteristics

Psychologists have done research on ER's personality as well. Like historians, psychologists attribute great significance to her traumatic youth and the major development she went through in her teens. The death of all of her family except her brother Gracie Hall "Hall" Roosevelt (1891-1941) resulted in a great deal of frustration and conflict. But in England, Madame Souvestre offered progressive informal lessons that successfully encouraged ER to think independently about her role in society and the larger world. Despite financial comfort, her emotional stability was disrupted numerous times, creating the will to attain love and approval. Blanche Wiesen Cook noted that "Eleanor Roosevelt never lived a sheltered or protected life. The 'Victorian' world of her father, and subsequently her young uncles and aunts, involved alcoholism, adultery, child molestation,

rape, abandonment. ER grew up with scandal, understood its nuances, and hated it. As a result, psychologists say, ER found that it was easier to earn love and approval at school, resulting in her academic persistence and success. And because she was taught to suppress her emotions, "she was subject to moodiness, melancholy, and childhood tantrums." She applied the same strategy to dealing with the Lucy Mercer affair; it was never mentioned again after ER's initial confrontation with her husband, and she distanced herself from her marital home by setting up shop with her two best friends at Val-Kill. In contrast to the secrets kept in her birth family, ER labeled the issue a marital affair, and others were aware of the situation, so she received some sympathy and support. The matter was unmentionable but never denied.

In the 1950s the psychologist Abraham Maslow constructed a theory that arranged five levels of human needs. The first level was comprised of primitive needs like breathing, food, water and sex. The highest level, a stage that not many people were capable of reaching, was "self-actualization." The concept was hard to define; it entailed character traits that could be considered good or honorable. Initially, Maslow saw ER in her widowed years, at the ages 60-78, as the only female example of a self-actualized person. Psychologists Michael Piechowski and Cynthia Tyska later did a case study of ER and analyzed her personality through rating autobiographical material and Lash's biography The Years Alone. The two argue that ER was inspired by life's "highest human ideals." She was task-oriented and simultaneously endeavored to solve problems that were basic to the human race as a

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whole. Her extraordinary vitality, realistic insight and humility counterbalanced the imperfections in her personality. Like other self-actualized persons, she was not emotionally self-sufficient; ER needed reassurance from others. According to Piechowski and Tyska, "What made her a self-actualizing individual was her compassion for others, her striving for independence, the conquest of her fears, the development of her talents as a public speaker, writer, and politician, and a sense of her own mission." 47 Piechowski and Tyska's study obviously strengthened Maslow's assertion that ER was not an ordinary woman.

**Influence as a First Lady**

Despite ER's habit of downplaying her influence, she had considerable impact on Democratic politics and wider public opinion from the 1920s onwards. According to Ruby Black, it was thanks to ER's work in the four most prominent women's organizations that women began to be taken seriously in the political arena and the Democratic Party. In 1940, when ER would still spend another five years in the White House, Black wrote: "Her prominence broke down the opposition of political leaders to women's emergence in the party. She gave a leadership which encouraged other women to go into political work." 48 FDR's political success enhanced ER's influence as well. Their partnership remained strong. In Black's words:

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After the little misunderstandings of their early life, there grew up between her and her husband that perfect confidence which can exist only between two people who admire each other's integrity, ability, and achievement. They came to meet on the equal intellectual basis, to respect each other's rights. In the President's busy life, they both hurried to tell each other all the things they wished to discuss together.49

Although Black passed over FDR's extramarital affair(s) as a "little misunderstandings," other sources confirm her assessment and agree that the couple confided in each other frequently. It remained a mystery for everyone involved where ER's influence with the President ended.

As the wife of a Democratic New York governor and subsequently President of the United States, ER could not be ignored when she asked for attention. More than once, ER wielded her influence in favor of her husband. An example of the First Lady's significant presence was her address to the 1940 National Democratic Convention in Chicago. FDR had chosen the controversial Henry A. Wallace to run with him as Vice President for an unprecedented third term. The Convention was in uproar and in a deadlock. FDR had convinced a hesitant ER to speak to the delegates. Her appearance was an enormous success because she created a sense of urgency to stop fighting and unite behind one leader. In a letter to ER's son-in-law, one delegate wrote that ER had "saved the situation to an unusual degree."50

49 Ibid., 89.
In her speech, ER used a rhetorical tool that she had used effectively before; she argued that the characteristics of that moment in time - with Europe at war - made unified and original actions necessary. Throughout the address, she never even mentioned Wallace's name but justified FDR's controversial nomination by saying: "You cannot treat it as you would treat an ordinary nomination in an ordinary time. We people in the United States have got to realize today that we face now a grave and serious situation." By using this rhetorical strategy, ER not only secured her husband's nomination for President in combination with his choice of Vice President, but also furthered her own political interests as a First Lady.51

FDR had his reasons to forego active campaigning and he did not make the trip to Chicago. For the time, it was unusual to send the First Lady to such an important political event. ER was the first Presidential spouse to take up such responsibilities, and she had a great deal of experience after two full terms in the White House. It was still a delicate situation, and Malvina Thompson had expressed concern about sending ER into the beehive. Again, ER justified her presence by saying it was "no ordinary time." She did not speak in her own self-interest but instead argued that: "No man who is candidate, or who is President, can carry this situation alone." She simply did her part in a time that demanded that "all good men and women give every bit of their service and strength to their country…." Implicitly ER supported her husband wholeheartedly; she made it her responsibility to support her husband's nomination of Wallace and asked the delegates to do the same. She had skillfully offered the delegates a new framework for the voting and effectively positioned herself in the political process.52

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51 Ibid., 215.
52 Ibid., 216.
The office of First Lady is not a very well defined position but because it is an influential one, its occupant often courts controversy. In the twentieth century, the First Lady became increasingly incorporated into the institutional structure of the White House. ER contributed greatly to this development. ER, like other First Ladies, had direct access to the President and therefore potential influence on his policies. According to one study, at least twenty-six First Ladies put themselves actively in such a crucial situation, starting with some of the earliest Presidents. This type of admittance to the chief executive, combined with the fact that the First Lady is not elected by the public, has been at the heart of controversies surrounding the office of First Spouse.

There is the issue of accountability. She, or perhaps someday he, does not receive pay from the government and, therefore, cannot be fired. Other advisors of the President can be asked to appear before a congressional committee to explain positions or policies. According to political scientist Barbara C. Burrell, "first ladies have advocated for policies before such committees, but as with the president and his personal advisors, traditionally first ladies are not readily subject to being called before those committees. Thus, this element of accountability is not present for the first lady or other high-level staffers. Congressional committees do hold oversight hearings, however, that affect personnel operations in the White House." But there are two ways that the First Lady is held accountable. She is so close

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54 Spoof websites such as www.billforfirstlady.com play with the idea that Bill Clinton is running for First Lady now too. (Accessed 13, March, 2008) Will his title be First Man?
to the President that her actions or incompetence can immediately harm the President's political clout and thus the possibility of re-election. Secondly, her actions are to a high degree scrutinized by the press, more than other high level White House staff members, and this fact can have an impact on her subsequent behavior and on her husband's political reputation. The First Lady can protect herself and hide her role as advisor behind the role of hostess. ER, at first unsure of herself, disguised her actions behind her capacity as hostess. She felt acutely aware of her boundaries and responsibilities as the First Lady and the political implications the role brought along with it. But she used her role as First Lady to access places far beyond the White House and convey her message to the larger world.

On many different issues, ER stood her ground with her husband and did everything in her power to, for example, promote positive relationships with her African-American friends and in this way counter racism. There was, however, a topic that she had to limit herself on in order to avoid a clash with FDR's interests. During WWII, civil liberties were curtailed for several groups in American society. ER disagreed with these limitations; she could not, however, endanger the President's foreign policy. FDR probably demanded, for example, that ER not speak out openly about her objections to the internment of Japanese Americans in relocation camps. She visited the camps and believed that it was wrong to let innocent citizens suffer "for a few guilty ones." But were any Japanese Americans really guilty of the crimes (i.e. treason) the entire population was suspected of? ER chose not to deal with this question during the war years. It was only after the war that ER picked up the topic of civil liberties again.

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55 Ibid., 183-184.
56 Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 131-133, 146.
As usual, ER unwaveringly maintained she had little influence with her husband on politics. Emil Ludwig, who had written a biography of FDR, suspected that ER pushed the President to show concern for "the underdog." When he voiced this, ER quickly contradicted his description of her as the underdog's champion: "I am not." Ludwig, however, was not convinced and told the Women's National Press Club that ER was: "only too modest … she denies having influence." According to Lash, constant denial was a clever way to deflect criticism. ER interpreted every praise she received as directed to the wife of the President. "That was partly true humility, partly superb tact, partly a cunning woman's recognition that the public considered such deference to one's husband seemly." But after FDR passed away, ER never stopped her public activities. Ludwig was not the only one to recognize the great impact ER's words could have; politicians saw it too. ER was one of the few to openly criticize the Un-American Activities Committee (UAAC). Criticism of the committee that she wrote in her "My Day" column was going to be submitted into the Congressional Record. Representative John Rankin, anti-Roosevelt in orientation, characterized the comments as a "vicious attack" and demanded that they should be stricken with the statement that: "Mrs. Roosevelt has done more harm than any other woman since Cleopatra!"

Aside from the people who disliked ER and attacked her on a regular basis, ER and the ideals she stood for appealed very much to the general public, to both Democrats and Republicans. In January 1939, a Gallup poll showed that the interviewees rated ER even

58 Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 151.
higher than her husband. Of those people surveyed, 67% were well disposed towards her activities, while 58% approved of her husband's actions as President.59

Mrs. Roosevelt’s incessant goings and comings, have been accepted as a rather welcome part of the national life. Women especially feel this way. But even men betray relatively small masculine impatience with the work and opinions of a very articulate lady. … The rich, who generally disapprove of Mrs. Roosevelt’s husband, seem just as friendly towards her as the poor. … Even among those extremely anti-Roosevelt citizens … there is a generous minority … who want Mrs. Roosevelt to remain in the public eye.60

In other words, according to the survey ER was a positive presence in the White House despite the many activities she took on. A personal letter of August 1940 from biographer Ruby Black to ER demonstrated this phenomenon.

Black had a background in the newspaper journalism and she had heard from a man named Dan Carlin that Republican newspapers syndicated "My Day" as an example of fairness around the time of the 1936 elections. After the elections that year, however, papers continued to carry the column due to readers' demand. Black also quoted a letter from Mr. Carlin:

... Mrs. Roosevelt has, since the last campaign, become more and more loved by Republicans as well as Democrats. She managed to achieve a place in the affection of readers that puts her above the storm and outside the battle. These editors feel that the use of MY DAY for partisan purposes would rob it of its unique distinction. While other columnists are snaffling and yammering and going into daily frenzies, it has always been pleasant to find in MY DAY a spirit of grace and kindliness.

Black found Carlin's interpretation remarkable and quasi-seriously suggested a subtitle for her biography of ER: "'Above the Storm and Outside the Battle' -- except that I know you breast the storms and engage in the battles, bless you." The letter reflects a good understanding of ER's ability to resonate strongly within all corners of American society and her tactfulness in appearing at least somewhat non-partisan or a-political. 61

Four years later, on election day 1944, ER's close friend Esther Lape sent a deeply personal letter to the First Lady that almost sounded like a love letter. Lape expressed her sincere confidence in ER and her wish to be with her on that important day. Lape wanted to let ER know how important she was to the world:

I hope you will take time to think out the best ways to make available--in the place and to the persons best able to use it--the tremendously increased powers that are so peculiarly yours. It sometimes seems to me that no human being ever had much chance to use power, both personally and impersonally, for stimulus and for grace

61 Ruby A Black, August 9, 1940, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
and for beauty and for persuasion and enlightenment. How to use it most effectively does involve selection and decisions not required of most of the rest of us.\textsuperscript{62}

About a week later, after FDR had decisively secured a fourth term, ER responded saying: "I know I have a responsibility in these next years, but again I feel inadequate and still find it hard to make a decision." This answer reveals ER's sense of duty and also an insecurity that might be a remnant from her childhood. Due to the enormous volumes of mail ER received daily, her answer was a typical short note typed up by Malvina "Tommie" Thompson. Nevertheless, it reflected great personal affection and was signed with "much love always."\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{Eleanor Roosevelt's use of the Media}

Being a First Lady inherently involved a great deal of coverage by the media. On top of this, ER used the written word, radio, and later even television as tools to disseminate her thoughts and dreams. ER had a curious way of managing the image that she wanted to portray of herself. At first glance, it looked like ER did not control her image at all. For example, pictures were taken of her wearing an unflattering coal miner's hat when she visited a mine. Over the years, she appeared in an advertisement for the Simmons Mattress Company and as a pitchwoman in a commercial for Good Luck Margarine. Photographs taken together with African-Americans could be considered controversial as well. And what is one to think about ER's radio series that ran in the summer of 1940? Halfway through discussions of women's role in education, business, marriage, the military, or the national

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Esther Lape, November 7, 1944, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
\item[63] Eleanor Roosevelt, November 16, 1944, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
\end{footnotes}
service, ER had to say, "and now let us pause a moment to hear a few words from our announcer," and wait for an advertisement for the Manhattan Soap Company's Sweetheart Soap. The advertisement always ended with the announcer presenting the slogan "the soap that agrees with your skin," and then introducing ER back on to the air. It appears that ER did not mind being associated with such household products. Perhaps she thought it would appeal to her female audience.64

ER was, however, not completely unconcerned about her media appearances. As a young woman ER had been known for her unstylish and unflattering clothing (she even wore hairnets!), but over the years she learned to show more interest in such matters. Every week she visited the hairdresser and had a manicure. Her daughter Anna had spurred ER to use some lipstick, and in 1938 she told her press conference: "My daughter says I have grown too old to go without lipstick. … She says I'll grow better at [using] it as time goes on." But she never thought highly of her own appearance. In "My Day" she made many derogatory remarks about herself. She wrote, for example, about a portrait of herself and thought that her own "set of features … might better be forgotten."65 Such personal insecurity derived from the hurtful comments her beautiful mother had once made to her daughter. These references to her appearance show that ER did care about her public image.

Documents in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers indicate that ER did control to a degree when and where a picture would be taken.66 Journalists or others would ask her if they could take a photograph and ER would give permission or deny it. FDR had the same privilege

64 Eleanor Roosevelt, “Should Daughters be Trained for Business or Marriage, Sweetheart Soap Series,” July 16, 1940, 5, Speech and Article File, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
65 Beasley, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media, 117.
66 Ruby A Black, March 18, 1943, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
and was able to shield his paralysis from the general public. Such a level of privacy is unthinkable in the twenty-first century. Ruby Black claimed that ER had refused many offers of advertisements with her name and picture in exchange for compensation. She permitted one organization, however, to depict her: "She allowed her picture to be used, without pay, in the advertising in which all the airlines joined to popularize flying among women, just as she set the example to other women by her increasingly frequent flights, by praising the lines' safety records and service, presenting trophies for outstanding flying, christening new planes and generally using every opportunity to boost aviation."^67

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ER learned early into her husband's Presidency how to deal with negative attention. In a 1938 radio interview, singer Kate Smith, asked ER how she felt about negative publicity. ER's reply was a bit dismissive: "Also I get very critical and very unflattering cartoons and critical articles, but you get, in a way, a little indifferent, you make up your mind what you want to do and forget the other things." For a politician, after all, such detachment was a necessity.68

Conclusion

The society that ER lived in was a world where men dominated political and professional life. ER, however, placed herself in the middle of this masculine realm. The way she shaped her actions as a working individual and a politician reflected the dichotomy between this part of her life and her role as a wife and mother. The impressive list of writings and achievements paint the picture of a woman who functioned fully alongside men and her husband in particular. ER's own words on the other hand, depict a thoroughly feminine character: modest, family oriented, caring and at the same time committed to reform goals that fitted a woman's agenda. In an approach that was probably partly natural and partly intentional, ER disguised her work with a feminine veil. This was a clever political strategy that made her more palatable to her setting, a necessary move in relation to her husband's career.

ER's political life was geared toward working in a traditionally male arena, but for her emotional needs she relied predominantly on women. It is significant to note that she gained

68 Kate Smith, “Mrs. Roosevelt Interview,” 1938, 5, Speech and Article File, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
her first political experience within women's organizations. She was an idealist and a realist at the same time; perhaps this helped her change from a "reluctant First Lady" into a high-profile and highly admired international celebrity. To use Maslow's terminology, ER's self-actualized personality helped her turn her conservative and insecure girlhood around into a highly active womanhood that was marked by a selfless eagerness to work towards the improvement of American society.
CHAPTER 2

Eleanor Roosevelt's vision

Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned a new, broader role in society for American women during the war years. In this vision, the difference between the domestic and public sphere was less distinct. When she was asked by an American citizen if he should help with household chores, ER answered the man with a determined "yes":

I think anything connected with the home is as much the husband’s as the wife’s. This silly idea that there is a division in housework seems to me foolish, when very often the wife earns money outside the home as well as the husband. Certainly if there are children, the wife has two jobs - the one of being a mother and the other being a wife. The kind of man who thinks that helping with the dishes is beneath him will also think that helping with the baby is beneath him, and then he certainly is not going to be a very successful father.69

This quotation is taken from a book by ER called If You Ask Me and was published in 1946. It gives a good impression of ER's views on women’s emancipation. ER was very progressive for her time and, as we see in this quotation, argued that men as well as women should be involved in the home. ER did not go as far as to erase the differences between male and female. She saw certain limits for women; women should cross these lines but do so without losing their femininity. Women should step out of a limited private sphere and

69 Eleanor Roosevelt, If You Ask Me (New York: D. Appleton-Century company, inc, 1946), 122. Exact question: “I love and admire my wife, but there is one subject on which we can never agree. She thinks I should help with the dishes. Do you think this is a husband's work?”
participate in the public sphere. The goal of this second chapter is to examine what ER’s views were on how women could contribute to the war effort during the Second World War.

With fragments from many different sources - speeches, columns and other written material - this chapter will argue that ER was a progressive woman who firmly held to the belief that women should step out of the private sphere and should, for example, receive equal pay with men for performing the same work. Such change would involve the introduction of new legislation, but ER tried to reach women through the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) as well. ER also understood that better circumstances had to be created for women to be able to balance family and professional responsibilities. The research in this chapter will, therefore, show that ER supported attempts to provide families with better housing and childcare facilities.

Though she was a hard working woman and she has left a large number of documents and other materials, it is nonetheless difficult to reconstruct ER’s thoughts on the particular subject of this chapter, women during the Second World War. A great deal is written about ER’s life but most sources focus on her relationship to FDR, her work for the United Nations in the 1950s or her views on civil rights. As explained in the previous chapter, ER's modesty often caused her to downplay her pioneering opinions, which influenced the way her contemporaries and later historians perceived her. This chapter will, however, reexamine sources on ER and provide additional context to interpret those sources.
Separate spheres

The Second World War took place in between two high profile phases of the American feminist movement. From the turn of the twentieth century to the 1920s, there was the suffragist movement that fought for the right to vote for women. Approximately forty years later, a women's movement erupted that battled to bring more women from the private into the public sphere. And although the dividing line between the two spheres was often blurred and evolved over these years, it is safe to say that the society that ER lived in had pretty firm ideas about a woman's "proper place." 70

The dominant pattern of the 1940s cast wives into care giving and home making roles and husbands into the responsibility of the breadwinner and participating citizen. The dividing line was, however, not that black-and-white and this gender segregation was constantly under negotiation and reaffirmed. What has been understood as “separate spheres” has changed over time because the term is a metaphor for complex power relations, constructions created for but also by women who often build their own female realms as well. The term was used by historians throughout time to draw an analytical order that was nonetheless based on reality and affected women’s position in society severely. During WWII, for instance, the argument that a woman’s place was at home was used to justify women's initial exclusion from war factories and later adapted to fit women's involvement in those factories. According to women's historian Linda Kerber, ““separate spheres’ was a trope that hid its instrumentality even from those who employed it; in that

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sense it was deeply ambiguous. In the ambiguity, perhaps, lay its appeal.” But the war necessitated women to step out of the strict role of the home maker and they contributed in many ways to the war effort. It is, however, important to realize that these shifts took place within the general conviction that women were different from men and that changes were at best temporary.

Women steadily entered the labor force during the first half of the twentieth century. The table in Appendix 1 shows that 29.4% of the women between the ages of 30 and 39 worked in 1901-1910, while in 1941-1950, 63.5% of these women were working or seeking work. In the other age groups women's participation rates rose in similar fashion. This shift did not mean that women gained a great deal of economic freedom. Gender continued to influence heavily what work women performed and how much pay they received, and marital status determined a woman's (dependent) position in the welfare system.

ER also acknowledged that women had a separate status. In her syndicated "My Day" column she wrote on October 9, 1945:

Women find themselves, in many cases, a minority group and are isolated in just the way certain nationality and religious groups are. ... as all women are now citizens, that is one place in which they need not function as a minority group unless they allow themselves to be pushed aside.

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She called out to all women to take part in local, state and national governments. Women should not accept treatment as a minority and emancipate themselves in the public realm. They should seek office and try to obtain votes by female collaboration. ER went on to say that through such involvement in government, women could earn a new place in society. Women would then better be able to protect their interests.

For instance, women may want to work, but unless there is full employment they will not obtain jobs. They must therefore be primarily interested in what is done in our national economy to provide work for all those who want work. They may have a special interest in their homes and in their children. But if war comes, they have to conform to the requirements of service for young people and of home conditions which govern the country as a whole.\(^75\)

ER was ahead of her time in the assertion that women should put themselves up for elections and acquire positions in government.

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The New Deal for women

In order to deal with the Great Depression of 1929, FDR launched, after his inauguration in 1933, a great number of government initiatives that came to be known as the New Deal. ER's vision for American society resembled her husband’s New Deal policies and

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her actions were often a direct extension of the New Deal line. The New Deal changed the American political landscape profoundly and made collectivist democratic liberalism the norm. With FDR at its head, the New Deal established a mixed welfare economy that accepted large scale bureaucratic organization. Private property and entrepreneurial opportunity were no longer the only focus of federal policies, civil liberties and civil rights were also deemed important. Washington became the center of social and economic policy.\textsuperscript{76} The New Deal suited ER and she went a step further in attributing great value to the ability of the community to improve social conditions.

In the fight against the consequences of the Great Depression, ER found a formidable ally in Molly Dewson. During ER's entire tenure as First Lady, the two women endeavored to get women appointed to all levels of FDR's administration. They both believed that women were instrumental in the confrontation against war and social injustice. Dewson presented Washington D.C.'s establishment with lists of names of women who were worthy of appointments because they believed women's influence was important to the New Deal's institutions. In instances that Dewson was unable to win her point, she would turn to ER, who would then take it to FDR or his key advisor Louis Howe. Their efforts paid off because by April, 1935, the Associated Press reported that over fifty women had been picked from those lists and worked in government positions. It was also with ER's urging that it was announced that the Civil Works Administration (CWA) planned to provide 100,000 jobs for women. With the support of Harry Hopkins - architect of the New Deal, women's rights supporter, and close adviser to FDR - this goal was achieved as well. Earlier,

ER had told a woman correspondent at one of her press conferences: "You may be sure that under the new Civil Works program women will not be overlooked."77

For ER to demand a New Deal for women was revolutionary at the time. In general, the New Deal bypassed women and it was often ER's personal influence that convinced men to pay attention to women's interests. It was particularly after her experience in the WTUL and the National Consumers League (NCL) that ER anticipated the changes promised by the New Deal. In a speech by Lady Astor at a luncheon of the NCL, ER was considered the heir of Florence Kelley, the well-known suffragist and social reformer. Shortly after FDR's election, Lady Astor said: "I came to pay tribute to two great women, Florence Kelley and Eleanor Roosevelt. . . I was thrilled to think that you have a woman in the White House who doesn't deal with things at the top but with those at the bottom." Boldly ER reacted to Astor's speech with the following statement:

    There is something fundamentally wrong with a civilization which tolerates conditions such as many of our people are facing today. We talk of a "new deal" and we believe in it. But we will have no "new deal" unless some of us are willing to sit down and think this situation out. It may require some drastic changes in our rather settles ideas and we must not be afraid of them.78

A decade later ER still believed in initiatives that would challenge society's attitudes on women in order to deal with the effects of WWII. And although she was a player in

American politics through her husband, she was not shy to take on nonconformist views. In women’s issues she often saw new possibilities. This did not mean that she offered completely revolutionary proposals because she never really broke down gender differences. But by suggesting new ways, she did push back boundaries.

**The Office of Civilian Defense**

An aspect that ER deemed extremely important in the war effort was civilian defense, and here she saw a major role for women. As co-chair she worked hard to build the Office of Civilian Defense. The British, who had entered the Second World War earlier, had already set up such an organization. ER, who had visited Britain, was impressed by the British Civil Defense program and took it as an example. The OCD was to coordinate the efforts of civilians and their communities to mobilize in every way for the war. Morale building was an aspect that could not be neglected in addition to more practical matters. It is in this female sphere of influence that women could be of great help.79 She wrote in 1941: “I believe there is work to be done by every man, woman and child in the country. Some of us take training which will make us useful in ways closely related to military work. Others, many more probably, can devote themselves to improving life in our own communities.”80 As will be shown in the next chapter, ER was convinced that women were capable of doing military work, but they also had an abundance of other opportunities to contribute to the war effort. In paid work, as volunteers or as good responsible housekeepers, women could be of significant help.

In fact, in an article for the *Ladies' Home Journal* of May 1941, ER elaborated on the higher goals of American women's contribution to their country. A year of compulsory service for young people was the topic of conversation and ER hoped that women would be included in that as well. In the first place, she saw girls doing their year of service in their own communities. Both the community and the woman would benefit most if she was, for example, trained as a nurse at the local hospital. Despite a difference in the nature of boys' and girls' service projects, ER believed in equality between the two sexes: "I believe that girls, … should be placed on exactly the same footing as men, and they should be given the same subsistence and the same wage." Immediately, ER recognized the wider social consequences of women's participation:

> It should also give girls a good opportunity for understanding what democracy really means. Girls are the potential mothers of the future generation, and with a full realization of what democracy means, what its obligations and responsibilities are, they can teach the children at home to supplement what is taught, or what we hope will be taught, in our schools.

Over all, the article drew a picture of a society where "women stand side by side with the men." Grand themes like gender attitudes, education, community, security, democracy, and even racial discrimination, religious intolerance, and fear as an enemy were all tackled in a magazine with a predominantly female audience.81

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In September 1941 ER became the co-chair of the OCD with Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of New York. The OCD was meant to coordinate efforts among governmental departments and to build morale and address problems such as housing, unemployment, migration and health that resulted from the stresses of war. But Mayor LaGuardia and ER did not always see eye-to-eye. ER noted: “I could not help realizing that the mayor was more interested in the dramatic aspects of civilian defense - such as whether cities had good firefighting equipment - than in such things as building morale.”82 After the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the following increase in activities, LaGuardia was no longer able to combine his mayor-ship and the OCD, and FDR replaced him with James Landis, Dean of Harvard Law School.83

Despite the controversies surrounding leadership issues, ER used every means within her reach to create broader support for the OCD. Not only did she take many questions on the topic from the women correspondents in her press conferences, she also used her "My Day" column to advertise the OCD. In late December 1941, ER wrote about some social engagements, but, more importantly, also mentioned her activities for the OCD’s planning. To make civilian defense useful, a broad collaboration was necessary.

It is evident that a great many people do not yet grasp the fact that civilian defense can not really be accomplished by adding auxiliary police and firemen to our existing forces, or even by appointing air raid wardens. There are some things which we can learn from England, different as our set-up must, of necessity, be. … The Red Cross

82 Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 323. As quoted from ER, This I Remember, 231.
83 Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 648.
will provide many of these services, but it meets the first emergency and then the
community services must step in to meet the continuous needs of the people.  

The very next day, December 30, 1941, ER addressed her thoughts on the problems of the
nationwide organization and reach of the OCD. In her opinion, the emphasis had to rest on
the shoulders of the regional division bureaus. She was "convinced, however, that we need
one over-all planning group, and two other groups to meet those needs by the use of ever[y]
available agency, public and private." ER had high hopes for the leaders within the OCD
structure and their accomplishments.

ER's chairmanship was under fire from day one. Martha Strayer, one of the woman
correspondents, called the attack after ER's very first day "the most embarrassing of them
all." In the "My Day" column of December 24, 1941, ER had in passing written that she had
been late on her first morning at the OCD office because the President "finally decided to
tell [her] that the British Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill, and his party were arriving
sometime in the late afternoon or evening." Triumphant newspapers and other critics
pointed out that the First Lady was ill-suited for the job. The Republican New York Herald-
Tribune wrote that Mrs. Roosevelt had "an improper attitude about getting to work on time."
It was an easy rebuke. Earlier, in September 1941, ER had already said at her press
conference she would not have regular hours. Traveling would take up a good part of her
time and as the First Lady she had other responsibilities as well.

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86 Beasley, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media, 145.
ER had to resign in February 1942 because of criticism of her alleged favoritism toward some staff members and other issues. Her position was no longer sustainable when the House of Representatives attacked two of ER’s staff appointments and banned the use of civilian defense funds for a particular project that involved "instruction in physical fitness by dancers." The resignation was the result of a wider tendency of conservatives to frustrate FDR’s policies that were New Deal related. ER’s chairmanship became untenable when the attacks became personal: “… I know if I stayed longer, I would bring more harm than good to the program.” Her status as the wife of the president had not only made her, but also the OCD, an easy target for criticism. It was very difficult for the First Lady to occupy an official position within the government.\footnote{Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 325-326; Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 649-653.}

Doris Kearns Goodwin, a well known historian and biographer of ER and FDR, explained that despite the somewhat humiliating end of ER’s chairmanship, ER had achieved one objective. The definition of civil defense had been broadened to include nutrition, housing, recreation and medical care. ER felt proud of what she had accomplished and moved on.\footnote{Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 326.}

**Eleanor Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor**

During the short time that ER was co-chairman of the OCD, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. ER immediately felt the need to activate every citizen and she wrote a powerful "My Day" column. The column for this special day commences by

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\[\text{References:}\]

\footnote{Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 325-326; Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 649-653.}
\footnote{Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 326.}
describing how suddenly the White House burst into activity and that Japan should not underestimate the coalition of enemies it had chosen. She ended with the following words:

The clouds of uncertainty and anxiety have been hanging over us for a long time. Now we know where we are. The work for those who are at home seems to be obvious. First, to do our own job, whatever it is, as well as we can possibly do it. Second, to add to it everything we can do in the way of civilian defense. Now, at last, every community must go to work to build up protection from attack.

We must build up the best possible community services, so that all of our people may feel secure because they know we are standing together and that whatever problems have to be met will be met by the community and not one lone individual. There is no weakness and insecurity when once this is understood.90

In these two short paragraphs ER succeeded in bringing up the two major points that permeated her work during the war years. She emphasized America’s need for civilian defense and cooperation as a community. Despite the fact she did not specifically mention women as a distinct group to contribute, these words are typical of many instances when she discussed the American workforce as a whole, men and women working together.

ER was more explicit about the role of women in the speech she gave on August 15, 1945, the day that Japan surrendered. She expressed great thankfulness and the hope that men would be able to return to their homes soon. She looked to the future postwar situation

as well and professed that it was up to the wisdom of mankind to shape a better world. In this speech she dedicated significant attention to women.

The power of women for good should be intensified because they will surely determine to work together in order to insure that the forces of the world are used for constructive purposes. Women want to create a world atmosphere in which human beings may develop in peace and loving understanding.91

Again, she expressed the urgency that all Americans should work together. ER’s comments were pervaded with the recognition that the potential for women and what they could achieve as a group or as individuals were endless.

**Women's contribution at the home**

During WWII millions of women had to deal with rationing policies. More than once ER spoke about rationing at the press conferences. Rationing affected her private life and the White House, and she thought this was a particularly important issue for other women as well. The restrictions on the use of sugar especially received a great deal of attention. More than once, ER was asked how much sugar the White House kitchen used and how much sugar non-residential employees consumed at the White House. ER answered such questions in a down-to-earth manner:

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I think most of the people eat only two meals in the White House. We’ll have to work it out. I think we’ll have to do considerable reorganizing as to dessert and cake, but I haven’t yet discussed exactly how this is going to be managed, because it’s rather complicated. We have so many people. We have a few that live there and do eat three meals a day. I think we’ll have to compute just exactly what that entitles you to.\(^{92}\)

The answers that ER gave always emphasized that she was limited by the rationings as much as any body else. In 1941 rationing policies were already instated and in August of that year she mentioned the shortage of fruit, bananas and oranges, and silk stockings.\(^{93}\) In January 1942, when the supply of tires was decreasing, ER directed female reporters to the subject of carpooling and shared her advice to drive 40 miles an hour because that would reduce the strain on tires. It is in these small, often simple and casual remarks, that ER shared wisdom with a female wartime audience.\(^{94}\)

**Women’s contribution at work**

On the home front women had many different choices in how they wanted to contribute to the war effort. The War Manpower Commission issued a 1942 booklet called *War Jobs for Women* that gave information and called for the mobilization of *womanpower*. It glamorized war work and stressed women’s capacity for various tasks, including volunteering


\(^{93}\) Ibid., 216. Taken from a press conference August 25, 1941.

\(^{94}\) Ibid., 255-256. Taken from a press conference January 19, 1942.
for the Red Cross or OCD, business and technical jobs, clerical jobs and working for the army, navy and federal agencies. Women could apply if they met the listed requirements. Mothers with children under 18 years and other categories of women were sometimes not eligible for all these positions, but *War Jobs for Women* also encouraged women to fulfill traditional roles as “mothers, wives and sweethearts.”

ER was particularly sympathetic toward women’s factory work. She encouraged both single and married women to take up factory jobs and she visited war factories and spoke to the women who were working there. Important gendered concerns that ER voiced were equal pay for both sexes and extra facilities that could help women manage their household. She called on the government to create childcare facilities or establish community kitchens that would provide wives and mothers with hot meals they could take home after their shifts ended. In *If You Ask Me*, ER was very clear on the issue of equal pay.

*Question:* “Do you think equal pay to women who fill men’s jobs is economically justified?”

*Answer:* “Certainly. If women do the same work I have always believed that they should receive the same pay.”

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95 Bilge Yesil, “‘Who said this is a Man’s War?’: Propaganda, Advertising Discourse and the Representation of War Worker Women During the Second World War,” *Media History* 10, no. 2 (2004): 107.


In the war years women often did not receive the same wages as men, although there were some exceptions to this general trend. By and large women received lower pay, even in the skilled workforce where women had gained new territory after 1941.98

Figure 3. Greetings are delivered personally by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt to Bernice Palmer, war worker who suggested more production shortcuts than any woman employee. ER visited Palmer on a whirlwind tour of the Packard Motor Car Company in connection with her study of women in war industry. She was escorted through the huge war plant by Packard’s Women coordinators, who act as counselors to the more than 9,000 female employees helping build Packard marine and Rolls-Royce aircraft engines.

An issue that has significant influence on a woman's income, and its relationship to that of her husband, is taxes. In her "My Day" column of August 7, 1941, ER wrote about a bill that had been presented to the House of Representatives proposing a joint income tax return for husband and wife. After mentioning seeing some people in New York City and a

visit to the hairdresser (a nice feminine touch), she devoted most of the column to the bill and its significance. She was pleased to see that the House of Representatives had not accepted the joint income tax. Although the tax would generate considerable income for the Federal Government, ER deemed it more important that women, wives in this instance, were "to be considered as persons" in a fiscal sense. "There was a time when a woman married and her property became her husband's[,] her earnings were her husband's and the control of the children was never in her hands." Later on, she took it a step further and saw consequences that would have been undesirable in a wartime economy.

It [the bill] might … prove to be a real deterrent to the work of women, and that brings us to the another rather fundamental question.

Do we believe that work of any kind, honestly performed, creates work? If so, then it is an advantage to have every individual using his abilities productively.

American war factories would be productive and grow the economy only if both men and women had access to employment in these facilities.99

The arrangements that were made during the war years for women to work in the military, in war factories, or in any other part of the war effort were all of a temporary nature. For example, in the Rosie the Riveter campaigns that the Office of War Information launched to stimulate women to work in war factories, it was clear that women took the place of men until the veterans returned from the fighting overseas.100 Returning veterans

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100 Evans, Born for Liberty, 222-223.
Eleanor Roosevelt's perspective on the ERA and equal pay

For women to be able to work during the war, but also before and after the 1940s, ER deemed it important that all prohibitive legislation should be removed and that it was a woman's own choice and responsibility to work. Particularly married women were hampered by legislation that affected women's participation in the job market. A large faction of feminists in the U.S., including ER, believed, however, that women needed protective legislation, and it was for this reason that she opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

In 1935 Ruby Black reported on ER's stance towards equal rights and equal pay in a crystal-clear article. According to Black, ER adhered to the following principles "by her words and her deeds":

- That women, married or unmarried, should not be barred from employment, public or private, and should have equal opportunity for jobs, promotion, and pay;
- That women should receive equal pay for equal work;
- That marriage should not interfere with a woman's work;
- That a woman is better off if she is economically independent of her husband (although she concedes the right of a woman [to] make her living by homemaking with the husband paying all the bills, if she wants to); …
- That women should hold elective and appointive office on equal terms with men; …
That a woman should organize - together with men if possible, only with women if necessary - to retain and advance their political and economic position.

So although she recognized the right of women to work, according to Black, "Mrs. Roosevelt still believes in 'protective' legislation, in a biological difference between men and women which, she says, requires different treatment in industry."\textsuperscript{101}

During WWII some legal and cultural barriers to the employment of married women were eliminated. An example of restrictions for working women was legislation that prevented government employment of a woman whose spouse was employed by the government.\textsuperscript{102} In several states, for example, laws against married women teachers were abolished. The war had spurred positive response towards reforms that were lacking in the 1920s and would disappear again in the 1950s. Unions had had considerable influence on advancements for female workers, particularly in the demand for equal pay.\textsuperscript{103}

Since 1923 the ERA had been presented to Congress, with the backing of the National Women's Party (NWP) with Alice Paul at its head, but without success. The ERA would have guaranteed equal rights for Americans regardless of sex on a Constitutional basis. After the Nineteenth Amendment when the right to vote for women was accepted, many Americans thought that full gender equality had been achieved. The NWP, however, remained most adamant that electoral equality did not equal full equality of women. The fundamental question of how to achieve economic independence was a greatly contested

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{103} Evans, Born for Liberty, 225, 240.
subject among the women's organizations. The NWP was one of the few that opposed special legislation for women's employment opportunities; ER certainly favored such measures.104

Immediately after WWII, the ERA made it to Congress again. At that point the Senate voted the amendment down by a vote of 38 to 35. In the discussion about the ERA, the Congressional Record shows that a joint statement was submitted to the Record, headed by ER but also signed by nine other prominent women such as Frances Perkins, Carrie Chapman Catt and Mary McLeod Bethune. At the core of the statement, the women explained their opposition to the ERA: "The adoption of this amendment would wipe out all State legislation which has established minimum wages and maximum hours for women workers and improved their working conditions; it would invalidate provisions of the Social Security Act benefiting women as wives and mothers, and veterans' and workmen's compensation laws providing allowances for widows and wives of aged or disabled workers." This statement concisely summed up the fears of these women leaders. The reproductive health of women was considered crucial and an asset that had to be safeguarded. Protective legislation had been hard earned particularly during the war, and very valuable. They considered "equal rights" a deceptive slogan because without regulations, women would be set back in their opportunities to make a living. ER's New Deal convictions were clearly recognizable in this initiative.105

Eleanor Roosevelt's call for housing

A topic that was often brought up in connection with racial inequality was housing. During the war, and particularly as co-chair of the OCD, ER addressed the need for housing to accommodate both men and women to work in the war effort. It was in that capacity that ER was asked to appear before the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration of the House of Representatives in 1942. The Committee was concerned about problems that workers ran into and discrimination against women and African Americans in training and employment. ER maintained in her answers to the Committee that in order to have a successful national defense and to keep the war economy going, people needed "the feeling that they can fight, because they are strong, they are well fed, they are well housed, they know they have a job and it is secure." And because a significant part of the new war jobs were concentrated in the cities, new housing and many other facilities had to be created. The OCD planned to facilitate these developments. In this testimony, the example of government war workers in the District of Columbia was taken as an example of a typical American city. In ER's opinion, the problems had grown even worse. Her interest particularly went out to housing facilities in the lower price level, most notably the black slums in D.C..

Alongside FDR's efforts for better housing, ER served on several committees that focused on housing issues in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1933 she became the champion for Arthurdale, a highly experimental homestead project for West Virginia coal miners. That same year she also joined the Housing Division of the Works Progress Administration

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(WPA), the New Deal program designed to put people to work. In 1936 she chaired the Washington Committee on Housing that turned into the Washington Housing Authority after ER publicized its existence extensively that same year. In 1943 it became the National Capital Housing Authority.107 Another controversial housing project that ER became involved in was the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in Detroit. Due to racial tensions in the newly developed Detroit neighborhoods housing war workers, riots ensued in 1943. And because ER had been engaged with the racial integration of these neighborhoods, she was accused of sparking the extensive violence. The southern press condemned her for having blood on her hands, even within the White House the topic was now considered "too hot" by Henry Wallace.108 This sketch of ER's activities shows her commitment to the cause of housing that particularly concerned African-Americans and women, groups with on average a lower income. The topic of government directed housing projects was highly complicated and controversial, but that did not stop ER from entering the debate.

Within the government ER rallied women representatives of various government departments around her to discuss the problems of housing facilities for women in the war industries. A press release of May 9, 1942 delineated the recommendations these twenty-three women and ER deemed important to solve the extremely bad conditions that women had to live in. It was the startup period of the war and problems such as profiteering, lack of

sanitation and over-crowding were rampant. The "girls," a common way to refer to women
workers at the time, had trouble finding safe housing, food and medical or dental care.
According to the women with whom ER met, solutions had to be sought in the building of
well organized dormitories or the help of volunteers in providing food and temporary
shelter. The press release does not provide any information as to where it was published. It
is likely, however, that the female correspondents who attended ER's press conferences
picked up on it and published it widely in the periodicals they represented.109

The resistance to day care facilities

The dominant belief towards child care was that stay at home mothers would
provide the best and only acceptable environment for children to grow up in. The war,
however, pressured families into looking for new solutions for managing the rearing of
children, and it was for the same reason that it was contentious that ER actively advocated
government sponsored day care centers. The OCD was involved with the day care facilities
in many communities, but even OCD co-chair LaGuardia did not think highly of them. On
the contrary, he said in January 1943 that "the worst mother is better than the best
institution." Frances Perkins had her doubts too. She asked Children's Bureau representative
Katherine Lenroot: "What are you doing to prevent the spread of the day nursery system
which I regard as the most unfortunate reaction to the hysterical propaganda about
recruiting women workers."110 Writers of protective legislation had been guided by the idea

109 Eleanor Roosevelt, “Conclusions and recommendations made as result of the discussion
Mrs. Roosevelt had with the wives of the heads of various government departments,” May 9,
1942, 1-2, Speech and Article File, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
110 Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 416.
that a (married) woman's perceived first responsibility lay in her role as a mother. Among lawmakers well into the 1960s it was thought that child care centers would distract a mother from her first priority, the family, towards a second, labor. Social reformers, many trade unionists and the public assumed that women's wage work would only compromise a child's upbringing.\footnote{Kessler-Harris, \textit{In Pursuit of Equity}, 33-34.}

In 1941 the Community Facilities Act had been passed and it was at ER's urging that in 1942 FDR approved of the first government funded child care center. The bill came to be known as the Lanham Act and authorized federal grants or loans to private and public organizations in war impacted areas, often in relation to child care facilities. The bill marked a great change in government policy but had moderate impact. Centers were established only in places with several war factories or shipyards near by, and at most 13\% of children needing care received federal assistance.\footnote{Abby J. Cohen, “A Brief History of Federal Financing for Child Care in the United States,” \textit{The Future of Children} 6, no. 2 (Summer - Autumn 1996): 27-28.} In general day care centers were seen as a tool to enhance war production because it relieved women from a part of their time consuming responsibilities, and not as a way to advance a woman's freedom.\footnote{Cynthia Ellen Harrison, \textit{On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945-1968} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3, 242.}

So ER had to overcome great social prejudices and traditions in governmental policies, and she took a risk in her attempts to set day care facilities in a more positive light. She was personally involved with the design of child care centers such as the Swan Island Center in Portland, Oregon, a hyper-modern facility that catered to women who worked in the two nearby shipyards.\footnote{Goodwin, \textit{No Ordinary Time}, 416-418.} The war had only been the beginning for further developments.
Towards the end of the war ER wrote in a magazine called *Click* about the effects of the war on women in the job market. The general message of the article was that the prospects for work for women depended upon availability and that it would be important that their children be ensured of adequate care. She wrote:

> Rarely can anyone replace a mother, but there are some women who are not gifted with children and resent having to do the work of the home. In that case, it may sometimes be better to find someone who loves to do that job, and release the mother for a different kind of work. She will probably be a better mother and a better companion for her husband when she is home if she does work she enjoys.115

In a reflection of the era's reservations, she ended the paragraph with a negating sentence:

"However, such cases are rare." Nonetheless, in her endeavors to ensure women of economic independence, childcare facilities played a very important role.

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115 Eleanor Roosevelt, “Woman's Place After the War,” *Click*, August 1944, 19.
Postwar expectations

With the end of the war, it was expected that the labor market would go through profound changes. The role of women in the postwar economy was uncertain. ER wrote a great deal on this topic and was always expecting women to find their way in employment. Already during a 1942 press conference, a woman correspondent asked her: “Can you get girls back into the kitchen after the war?” ER recognized the implications of the question and answered:

I don’t think you could plan for that now. You should try now to get them to do things that are needed now. Many of those girls will get married when the war is over. Those who are very good and really like their work will probably stay in work
of some kind. So that I doubt very much if you could plan now. I would rather try to plan how to keep them out of the kitchens after the war.\footnote{Beasley, \textit{The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt}, 288.}

ER proved to be right; after the war women married younger and at higher rates and the large wave of "baby boom" babies were born. The marriage rate peaked in 1946 at 118 per 1,000 women fifteen years and older, compared to 79 per 1,000 women in 1926. The median age at first marriage fell between 1940 and 1950 from 21.5 to 20.3 for women and from 24.3 to 22.7 for men.\footnote{Evans, \textit{Born for Liberty}, 236-237.} ER understood that young people wanted to get married and start a home after four stressful years. She would have liked to see that women married \textit{and} participated in the workforce. During the war she saw the necessity of the extra contribution of women and that many women and girls had found their place in the workforce. In a foreword ER wrote for \textit{The Journal of Educational Sociology} in April 1944, she discussed how she expected that many women would want to return home after they had worked for patriotic reasons, but maybe as many women would "have found [permanent] places in the business world, in the professions, in factories, and in the fields." ER went on to say: "The breadwinner in many a family may have been taken from them to some faraway battlefield, or they may really have found that this added interest in their life is something they do not wish to give up.” In ER’s opinion, women had more at stake than ever before and should fight for postwar employment.\footnote{Eleanor Roosevelt, “Women in the Postwar World: Foreword,” \textit{Journal of Educational Sociology} 17, no. 8 (April 1944): 449-450.}
Although four out of five women in industrial work preferred to stay on the job, this was mostly impossible when war factories closed down and refused to rehire women when they opened their doors again. The work that the U.S. Employment Service offered these women paid half of what they had earned during the war. Skilled industrial work was no longer open to women. This is one example of the major shifts in the workforce that occurred after the war ended. Some sporadic protests did erupt, but they remained small and unconnected.\textsuperscript{119}

Conclusion

ER challenged gender roles profoundly with her demands for equal pay, day care services and an active role for women outside the house and in the larger community or job market. In her many activities as First Lady and a politician, she tried to change American society for the better while risking her reputation in the process. As an officer for the OCD she attracted a great deal of attention from sympathizers but also from critics. She used all media within her means to promote personal and governmental projects for working women (two categories that were often intertwined). Possible controversy would not stop ER from pursuing her beliefs. In the eyes of a twenty-first century individual, demands for equal pay or day care seem natural, but at the time they were novel. ER found herself in a time period when these principles were not well established, and she placed herself in the front lines of the debate; a possibly hazardous position as the First Lady.

Yet, she found a middle ground and wanted to "compromise up" for women, to use her own expression. She saw a broader role for women that also respected the different

\textsuperscript{119} Evans, \textit{Born for Liberty}, 228-230.
interests of men and women in employment. A woman's contribution to the war effort could include either voluntary or wage work and be shaped to fit gendered responsibilities.

ER's involvement in institutions such as the OCD illustrated her belief in a communal effort. The OCD was a national organization designed to benefit the national war effort, but in the end it came down to the local projects and the volunteers in the neighborhood. ER's powerful position within FDR's administration enabled her to put into action her conviction that the government should help women be financially independent and contribute to the war effort. For this reason, as explained earlier in this chapter, she opposed the ERA.

Overall, ER greatly contributed to policymaking and the shaping of public opinion about women's role in the World War II workforce.
CHAPTER 3

Eleanor Roosevelt's view on women in the military

Women contributed to the war effort of the Second World War in many different ways. As shown in the previous chapter, women worked hard on the home front, but this chapter will focus on the service of women in the military. When the war broke out for the U.S., the idea of women serving in military branches was novel. It became apparent that women were eager to serve and that the war required that in addition to every able bodied man, women had to make themselves useful in the armed services to meet the struggle of winning the war. Research on ER's plan for women in wartime America can only leave the impression that the notion of women in the military was a logical one.

ER knew women would be physically and mentally capable to go overseas. She made trips to Britain and the Pacific, and always paid great attention to the women there. Within the government ER advanced women's cause as well through her network of female and male contacts in Washington D.C. Not only did she speak of military matters very often, she always put the female side in a positive light. In addition to that, she addressed the issue of racial discrimination within the military repeatedly, a matter that concerned African-American women. It is also noteworthy that ER advocated a draft or a conscription for training in peace time for boys and girls alike. Women would be instructed for different - non-combat - tasks but the government would have a useful organization and these young people would learn a new set of skills. The topic of ER and women in the military has not

120 American women served to a small in the military extend during WW I.
received any emphasis in scholarly literature. This chapter will, however, examine ER's views on female military service and argue that she defied dominant conservative expectations for women and instead attempted to empower them.

The modesty that characterized ER, as explained in the first chapter, hampers attempts to determine what her achievements were in promoting women's involvement in the military. She rarely wanted to take credit for her influence. In my research there was no direct evidence for forthright pressure on FDR. Behind the scenes ER was in close contact with Oveta Culp Hobby, the first Director of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), and a pioneer on including women in the Army. A great number of documents in the correspondence file of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers confirm the connection between the two women. ER influenced popular opinion as well, most notably in her "My Day" columns and her section entitled "If You Ask Me" in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. She was an advocate for the WAAC and the other military divisions in the military; the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), and the Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard (the SPARS, short for *semper paratus*; 'always ready' in Latin).

In 1942 ER traveled to Britain to visit the American troops; in 1943 she made her rounds in the Pacific to see with her own eyes the state of the troops and civilians. Both trips had been densely scheduled with encounters with people of all levels in the military. ER published a great deal on her experiences overseas and often women received her attention in her writing. An article for the *Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "What I Saw in the South Seas" was a good example. She had acquired a good sense of the living circumstances of the soldiers. She praised the men for their work.
Many of them, under ordinary conditions, would not have developed the ingenuity or the determination which has made of them inventors, builders, good fighters in entirely new environments. If this is so of men, it is apt to be doubly true of the women.

On the next page she compared the military services of New Zealand, Australia and Great Britain with the American military in relation to the use of women. As it was in many other instances of ER's accounts, British women were the shining example in military participation. The need had been the highest in Great Britain and therefore stimulated women to step up. She mentioned that the WAVES were not allowed to go overseas and WACs (in July 1943 the name "Auxiliary" had been dropped in WAAC) were not allowed to operate as many different vehicles as men. The statement intentionally or unintentionally implied that American women were capable of greater responsibilities but were restricted by regulations.122

A woman's citizenship

Similar to the distinction in gender roles in the defense effort on the home front, ER lived in a society that followed gendered rules in the military services. The division between a male and a female's position in society was in wartime America still highly visible, and in relation to citizenship, one specific element set men's and women's responsibilities apart: fighting in the military. Men put on a uniform and fought for their country. Women

however, were less likely to enter the military and were restricted from combat. Another vital
part of American citizenship is jury duty. It was impossible or discouraged for women in
many states to be jury members until 1975, when the Supreme Court prohibited sex
discrimination in the obligation for jury duty. Conventions like these cast women into
different roles in serving their country.123

The way that American female citizenship was shaped up to WWII had a long history. When American law makers wrote the Constitution, they adopted the English common law on relations between husband and wife. Spouses were regarded as one, a civil entity. The wife’s first obligation was to her husband, not to the state. Most men, on the other hand, always had a direct relationship to the state in the shape of civil rights and civil obligations such as voting or jury duty. Minorities such as African Americans experienced similar restrictions in citizenship, but their emancipation toward full civil rights followed another path. The femme covert, a legal term for a married women, “had no political relation to the state any more than an alien” according to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in 1805. Married women were "covered" by their husband’s civic identity. In this way sharp constraints were placed on the extent to which married women controlled their bodies and their property.124

From the second half of the 19th century on, women increasingly secured more individual rights, but the relationship between women and the state remained less clear-cut

124 “Not until 1992 did the Supreme Court specifically announce that it would no longer recognize the power of husbands over the bodies of their wives. That is the moment when coverture, as a living legal principle, died.” Linda K Kerber, No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), xxiii, 305, 307; Stetson, Women’s Rights in the USA : Policy Debates and Gender Roles, 178-179
than the relationship men had with the state. The dominant way a relationship was shaped between husband and wife from the early 1900s until the 1960s was an equal-but-separate relation. Marriage was considered to be a union in which husband and wife made a different but equal contribution. As late as 1968, women faced common-law legal disabilities in some states. So in the 1940s it was still generally accepted that women made different contributions as a citizen.125 Serving in the military became accepted as long as women performed auxiliary tasks. Fighting was, and still is, another matter. Women in combat positions were rare all over the world.

The duty of a soldier was not considered to be a female role. The Supreme Court had previously stated: “The very conception of a just government and its duty to the citizens includes the reciprocal obligation of the citizen to render military service in case of need and right to compel it.” Only a particular proportion of all male American citizens was considered liable to respond to military draft in the 1940 reconfiguration of draft legislation. The contrast between men and women was not taken into consideration and stayed in place. Clearly women were expected never to take up a weapon and to stay at home. This principle did not mean that nothing changed for women during WWII. They did step out of the strict role of the home maker and contributed in many ways to the war effort. It is, however, important to realize that these shifts took place within the general conviction that women were different from men and that changes were at best temporary.126

Leading women into the military

ER’s discussion of women who were active in the military made it seem natural that women contributed to the war effort. After women entered the American military in 1942, more than 350,000 women participated in several branches but mostly in clerical jobs, in supply areas or as nurses.127 Women constituted only 3 percent of all American military personnel.128 As a contrast, it was in the USSR, US’s wartime ally, that female participation reached its height at the end of 1943 with more than 800,000 women serving in the armed forces. In many fields, gender differences almost ceased to exist where they were in place before, both in and outside the armed services. By the war’s end more than a million Soviet women had done military service, constituting about 8 percent of military personnel overall. A large difference was that Soviet women had fought on every front and in all branches of the service. Female snipers were particularly successful and well known. Despite women’s success in crossing gender lines, Soviet propaganda held on to women’s stereotypes, particularly picturing them as mothers and the embodiment of home and family, designed to bolster men’s morale. In this sense the situation was comparable to the U.S.129

In her "My Day" column, ER emphasized the importance of women in military work. A few months before full US involvement in the war, on September 3, 1941, she wrote: “… I find that certain groups of women think that I do not believe in the participation of women in national defense. I can hardly understand how this misconception took place, because I have wanted women to take their place in national defense long before

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127 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 222.
government machinery was set up.” Roosevelt, *Eleanor Roosevelt’s My Day*, 216. An interesting fact is that ER only missed four days in the whole 30 years that she wrote “My Day,” this was when FDR died in 1945.

ER believed that women should have maximum possibilities if they chose to enter the military. More than 350,000 women had successfully joined, but they were assigned to subordinate tasks. ER was keenly aware of the limitations women faced and she wrote about it in her *My Day* column in October 1943. She had seen a film on the British Women’s Military Auxiliary Services, and she was “not sure” if American women received the same encouragement from men to enter the services or were as convinced that they were needed. American women in the services occupied a smaller variety of jobs, and they encountered an attitude from men that said: “Oh yes, you have come in to wear a uniform, but you don’t really mean ever to do a job which will inconvenience you or change the ease we men are expected to provide for our women.” ER countered, “Life in the armed services is hard and uncomfortable, but I think women can stand up under that type of living just as well as men.

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130 Roosevelt, *Eleanor Roosevelt’s My Day*, 216. An interesting fact is that ER only missed four days in the whole 30 years that she wrote “My Day,” this was when FDR died in 1945.

… Why should British, Australian and New Zealand women render services to and with our men and we be barred?” ER had witnessed how in other countries women received greater opportunities in the armed forces and argued strongly on behalf of her fellow American women for comparable treatment.132

The presence of women in the military was problematic in several different ways. ER, however, did not over-problematize this. Women were not allowed in combat positions to begin with. A second problem was that these young women would enter an entirely male world. An article by Leisa Meyer entitled "Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Woman's Army Corps during World War II” expertly points out the moral objections and prejudices of Americans against the WACs. Oveta Culp Hobby not only had to deal with the practical management of the Corps, but also with the popular perception of the women's living circumstances. People were afraid that the servicewomen were merely "camp followers," would become lesbians or lose their femininity. Hobby strove

to portray her women as asexual and chaste, creating a new category of women. Critics raised fundamental fears of women abandoning their social responsibilities as homemakers "to usurp men's duty of protecting and defending their homes and country," and voiced concerns about the safety of the women or an extensive loosening of sexual mores among young people. Beliefs derived from Freud's psychoanalytic theories caused the public to feel concerned about a lack of "proper sexual development" resulting in homosexuality. Hobby summed up these concerns in a postwar interview with the following words:

   Just as a startled public was once sure that women's suffrage would make women unwomanly, so the thought of "women soldiers" caused some people to assume that WAC units would inevitably be hotbeds for perversion.133

   Relationships, heterosexual and homosexual, did occur in the Army. The commanding officers designed different strategies to regulate these and their effects. To defuse concerns about homosexuality, recruitment material presented women as sexually attractive to men. One such example was an article saying: "soldiering hasn't transformed these Wacs into Amazons - far from it. They have retained their femininity." An undesirable effect of relationships were venereal diseases. Hobby firmly opposed a venereal disease prevention program such as was in place for the men. The existence of a program of that type would undercut the asexual image of the women. The WACs were often severely

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restricted in their freedom to move around, rules characterized as unbearable and patronizing by the WAC servicewomen in several different base locations.

Often the male G.I.s and the WACs were the only Americans around and their meeting was heavily regulated, particularly when there were African-American men present. Sometimes they were labeled "dangerous" to women. And after rumors of widespread lesbian activities in New Guinea that supposedly resulted from the severe restrictions placed on the women, Lt. Col. Mary Agnes Brown issued a noteworthy report. The rules on recreational opportunities had to be slackened "with a view of maintaining the normal relationships between men and women that exist at home and to avoid the creation of abnormal conditions which otherwise are bound to arise." In her opinion it was better for the women to have sex with the male service men than to get involved with their fellow WACs.134

Secretly there had been an experiment with WACs training for mixed gender antiaircraft units (AA) between December 1942 and April 1943. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall was presented with a delicate situation because the women proved to be extremely successful. What to do with AA units that were more efficient and quicker to train? Could they be sent into combat areas? Marshall's biggest concern was that the number of women who volunteered had already subsided as a result of uneasiness about gender issues. It would have been very difficult to propose a bill to Congress to expand WAC, particularly to get past Southern Congressmen who never liked the Corps. He faced a Congress that had just prevented WAVES from going overseas, and the hostility of the general public against nontraditional gender roles. The rest of the commanding staff did not

134 Ibid., 586, 590-591.
think sending mixed AA units to the front was agreeable either. Facing such great opposition, Marshall terminated the experiment and reassigned the WACs.\footnote{135 D'Ann Campbell, “Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union,” \textit{The Journal of Military History} 57, no. 2 (April 1993): 304-306.}

Women who served in the military were in many respects ignored. It was not until the Gulf War (1990-1991) that they were officially recognized. In 1992 a Presidential Commission was established by Congress that held hearings about women's position in the military during the Gulf War and in previous wars. In earlier decades and also during WWII, service women were treated with a double standard. Returning female POWs were regarded as victims, instead of as heroes. Equal pay and equal ranking were issues as well.\footnote{136 Linda Bird Francke, “Women in the Gulf War,” in \textit{Women's America: Refocusing the Past}, ed. Linda K Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 653-654; Campbell, “Women in Combat,” 306.}

Integration of the armed forces was a gradual process in many Western countries as a result of progress in bureaucratic structures and scientific-technological advances, creating jobs where women were allowed. The decline of draft systems and the tendency to rely on voluntary-based systems has now made it more likely for women to join the military.\footnote{137 Marina Nucari, “Women in the Military: Sociological Arguments for Integration,” in \textit{Handbook of the Sociology of the Military}, ed. Giuseppe Caforio, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Pisa, Italy: Italian Inter university Centre of Historical and Military Studies, 2006), 283-284, http://ebooks.ohiolink.edu/xtf-ebc/view?docId=tei/sv/0387345760/0387345760.xml&chunk.id=front_1&toc.depth=1&toce.id=&brand=default.}

\textbf{Eleanor Roosevelt's connection to Oveta Culp Hobby}

The influence ER exerted in Washington D.C. was often of a personal nature. The file of correspondence between Oveta Culp Hobby and ER mostly contains documents
related to the WAC, since Hobby was its director. Some of the communication is evidence of a more personal affiliation between the two women. There are handwritten notes, more often from Hobby than from ER because Malvina Thompson translated her handwriting into typed messages. Unusual is the note that accompanied a box of "Fancy Texas Grapefruit" that Hobby sent to the Roosevelts in December 1943 through a Texan company as a Christmas gift. Naturally the present was answered with some kind words: "The President and I are delighted to have the grapefruit. It is something which we both enjoy and it was so kind of you to remember us at the Christmas season. With many thanks, I am/Very sincerely yours." These touches illustrate how ER connected to women around her that

The boxes of correspondence that cover the war years 1942 to 1944 give a good cross section of what topics ER was concerned with in relation to women in the military. It was known to the public that ER had a connection with Hobby and it was for this reason that women sent her letters in order to get a foot in the door with the armed services. ER forwarded to Hobby in April 1942 the letters of four women who wanted to serve. The four women were from Oregon, Connecticut and New York and it was a smart idea to appeal to ER in D.C. Their letters were sent from the personal office of ER to that of Hobby, who forwarded them to the appropriate officials. ER did the same with the letter of a woman from the Bronx, New York, who found herself in a delicate situation. She had given birth to a baby and given it up for adoption, but neglected to mention this in her paperwork. It forced her to wait eighteen months to reenlist. The woman did not want to be delayed for that long and asked ER to mediate for a waiver. ER received so much mail that she often
asked Thompson to forward a letter, as she did in this case. She ensured the letter's arrival at the appropriate desk.  

ER made a personal request to Hobby of which a great deal can be reconstructed through archival evidence in the Hobby file. ER's close friend Marion Dickerman wanted to make herself of use in a direct way to the war effort "for patriotic reasons." ER sent Hobby in person Dickerman's resume and recommended her because she had great organizational skills. Also preserved are the answers Hobby sent to ER and Dickerman. Unfortunately Dickerman could not be employed at the WAAC Headquarters, wrote Hobby. The Headquarters was temporarily manned by Army officers until the WAAC officers could replace them. And at the time of writing this letter, the selected women were going to enter

138 Eleanor Roosevelt, April 1, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Oveta Culp Hobby, April 6, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Eleanor Roosevelt, September 5, 1944, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
the Officer Training School ten days later; without that training Dickerman was not eligible. This exchange proved how eager women of all ages were to serve in the military and that ER tried to facilitate those efforts.  

That same year, November 1942, Hobby suggested to ER too visit the WAC camp in Des Moines, Iowa. Fort Des Moines was the first training center for the WACs. Why would Hobby ask ER to accompany her? ER's inspection of the camp would almost certainly generate publicity and therefore greater visibility for the WACs, an organization that was volunteer based. With ER's backing, Hobby's word would carry greater weight. ER made the trip in February 1943 and she wrote Hobby afterwards that she enjoyed it very much. One of the women who were at the camp was Dorothy Remmer. She probably met ER at the time and pleaded with her later that year because she had broken her leg and never graduated from the Officer Candidate School. ER wondered in a note to Hobby if there was a chance that Private Remmer would be granted that opportunity. Again someone appealed to her personal influence and ER was under the impression she could be helpful to an American citizen.

The fate of the Japanese-Americans in the internment camps was close to ER's heart, an issue that made its way into the Hobby file as well. In the middle of the war ER made visits to a camp in Arizona and encountered Japanese girls who, understandably, wanted a way to get out. One opportunity for both men and women was to join the military. ER

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139 Eleanor Roosevelt, July 7, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Oveta Culp Hobby, July 10, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Oveta Culp Hobby, July 10, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.

140 Oveta Culp Hobby, November 21, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Eleanor Roosevelt, February 23, 1943, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Eleanor Roosevelt, February 26, 1943, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.
inquired with Hobby if it was possible for the girls to join the WAC in a letter of May 6, 1943. She wrote:

… the young Japanese girls who are American citizens, asked me if it was going to be possible for them to enlist in the WAAC. They know of course, that they have to be thoroughly investigated and that they may have to go into a unit made up of Japanese girls, but they are anxious to have the opportunity.

In Hobby's absence, Col. T. B. Catron answered the inquiry the next day in her place. Apparently the idea was being investigated and planned out, Hobby indicated that she was "ready to proceed and [was] awaiting orders." The file did not contain any further correspondence, but it showed that ER often followed up on visits she made, even if it was a simple inquiry such as this.\footnote{Eleanor Roosevelt, May 6, 1943, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; T.B. Catron, May 7, 1943, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers.}

The armed forces during WWII recruited African-Americans, including African-American women, to serve in many different capacities. ER was well known for her stance on desegregation and it was for this reason that chairman John A. Lapp of the Union for Democratic Action wrote to her in August 1942. They had received reports that the training facilities of Fort Des Moines were segregated. Lapp wrote: "We are writing to you in the hope that you may have an opportunity to investigate this situation and set in motion these influences which would remedy it." Segregation would be appalling because these women
Figure 7. "Auxiliaries Ruth Wade and Lucille Mayo (left to right) further demonstrate their ability to service trucks as taught them during the processing period at Fort Des Moines and put into practice at Fort Huachuca, Arizona." December 8, 1942. Source: http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/ww2-pictures/images/african-americans-wwii-145.jpg

were highly skilled. ER, in turn, forwarded the letter with a friendly note. Hobby knew exactly what the circumstances were and answered instantly. She reported that the African-American companies had their own barracks but that they ate at an integrated mess. They had their own recreation center and the time in the swimming pool was allotted for every unit separately as well. "It is believed that the Negro women at Fort Des Moines are satisfied and happy in their present situation," concluded Hobby. Once more material in the archive proves that ER did not only use the mainstream press to address racial discrimination. Perhaps Lapp was satisfied with this report through official channels.¹⁴²

Applicants for WAC had to be U.S. citizens and between the ages of 21 and 45 years old. There was a physical requirement as well; women had to be at least five feet tall and weigh a hundred pounds. The interest for the first officer training program in 1942 was

¹⁴² Eleanor Roosevelt, August 24, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; John A. Lapp, August 12, 1942, General Correspondence, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers. In hand writing at the bottom of the page Hobby invited ER to the graduation ceremony of one of the first classes of WACs because it would mean so much to the students.
overwhelming: 35,000 applications for less than a thousand anticipated positions. In the following years the WAC did not reach expected numbers, but even in 1944 ER heard about a great number of young women who wanted to join. She suggested in a "My Day" column in June of that year that Congress could possibly look into lowering the age limit because of the great interest. Concern about the recruitment numbers had caused some observers to question the 21 age minimum back in 1943, but at that time ER had argued that the age minimum was appropriate. One reader of the *Ladies' Home Journal* was of the opinion that girls at eighteen were more mature than boys at the same age, eighteen being the draft age for men. In her answer, ER referred to Miss McAfee of the WAVES and WAC director Hobby and that they felt that the women had to be responsible enough because they would be interacting with male soldiers. The need to lower the service age for women was not yet critical in 1943 and was kept at the age of twenty-one.\(^{143}\)

Her June 1944 column also recounted how she had visited the U.S. Information Center the day before to see an exhibition that was a part of WAC's recruitment campaign. In ER's opinion "there would be something there to interest every girl" on the list of different jobs for Corps women. In 1942 the list of jobs in the armed services for WAC, WAVES and SPARS encompassed accountants, aircraft specialists, control tower operators, dietitians, automobile drivers, laboratory assistants, mimeograph operators, photographers, telegraph operators, typists and waitresses, among a number of others. The Red Cross had the responsibility to recruit Army and Navy nurses, who played an important role as well.\(^{144}\)

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\(^{144}\) Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” *United Feature Syndicate, Inc.*, June 10, 1944; “WAVES, WAAC's, SPARS, and Nurses,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 43, no. 2 (February 1943):
A draft of women?

In 1940 the debate about how to get men and women to contribute to the defense effort, militarily or non-militarily, had already begun to take shape. During and after the war ER would argue for some kind of draft for women. The issue of the draft had first come up in ER's involvement with the National Youth Administration (NYA). NYA administrator Aubrey Williams asked her why women were not included in the compulsory service bills presented to Congress. ER immediately asked the President in a phone conversation the following question: "If we are going to mobilize the nation, why should we leave out half of the nation, especially the half that has the most leisure and the least training?" FDR agreed with her in principle but did not think it was politically feasible to get Congress to pass a bill for compulsory training. 145

Predictably the idea elicited a great deal of controversy. When ER talked about conscription for girls at a conference of educators, governmental youth agencies and work camp directors, there was a lively discussion. This occurred particularly because military training was considered inappropriate for girls, as was putting them in training camps. For this reason ER suggested that the women should perform services to their own communities. She said, according to The New York Times:

I do think it is of value to discuss it, because I have a feeling that in most cases the girl has less opportunity for a broad point of view and for broad contacts than the

145 Black, Eleanor Roosevelt, 220-221.
boy. You can't say it is universally so. It is frequently so and that a girl would be expected to give a year's service to improve her community, and in so doing acquire some training which might be of value to her in later life, whether at the home or as a wage earner, there might be some value in the plan.\textsuperscript{146}

In a two-page spread for the magazine \textit{Liberty}, ER attempted to explain her viewpoint more elaborately. Displeased citizens had written her many questions, for example, comparing such conscripted labor to German forced labor. The benefits that ER saw for the women between eighteen and twenty-four years old was to teach them discipline, just like men learned in the military. The draft would not even be for every woman but definitely would reach more women than in a system organized on a voluntary basis. She wanted to target girls who were in economic difficulty or lagged behind in chances for education. Another fear was the competition with people who were already skilled and worked for full wages. The drafted women would, however, perform different kinds of work and would be paid the same as draftees in the army. And just like the military services, this project would be for the good of the whole country.\textsuperscript{147}

Frequently ER emphasized that her proposal was not exactly a military draft services or anything to do with combat duties. This notion was too extreme and would not serve ER's intended purpose. One reader of the \textit{Ladies' Home Journal} asked her in 1943 if there was a chance that women would be drafted into the armed forces. ER wrote that there was not the "slightest possibility at present," and if there was a draft for women, it would be into the

\textsuperscript{146}“Draft of Women Topic at Parley,” 19.
\textsuperscript{147}Eleanor Roosevelt, “Shall We Draft American Women?,” \textit{Liberty}, September 14, 1941, 10-11.
WAC or WAVES. A year later the topic was brought up again. At that moment ER elaborated a bit further on compulsory training and its benefits. The young people, particularly girls, would learn more about the meaning of citizenship in a democracy through service because they were "contributing to the well-being of the nation." Women would be taught skills that were related to nutrition, health or the nursing and rearing of children; all valuable lessons for the future.¹⁴⁸

Needless to say that ER’s idea of a draft for women as a complement to the draft for men never materialized, despite the fact that it was a non-military service. The debate that ER wanted to initiate did, however, challenge the notion that girls belonged solely at home. She cast women into the role of full citizens and all the responsibilities that came with that status.

Figure 8. Eleanor Roosevelt in Australia, 1943
John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Records of the Curtin family. Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt on a visit to Australia, September 1943.

Conclusion

Before WWII, women's divisions of the armed services did not exist. To ER it was logical that women were asked to contribute to the war effort outside the home, even in the military if that meant that another man was freed for active duty. The historical development of woman's citizenship did not allow women to carry arms; therefore, the only way they could serve in the military was in the support services that were essential to sustaining the soldiers at the front. It was a man's responsibility to pull the trigger and kill the enemy to protect the home country. Only because that responsibility was never challenged was it possible for women to enlist. Due to people such as ER, women were able to get as close as possible to that dividing line between the image of a women contributing to the defense effort and that of a man holding a gun.

On her extensive travels during the war years in Europe and the Pacific, ER saw what women were capable of. Back at home she ardently spread the message of what she had seen and how she pictured American women following that example. In that process she questioned the conservative separation between the female domestic sphere and the male public sphere. She never completely violated the dividing line and believed herself that a member of each sex answered to different responsibilities and ideals. The continuous motif in ER's beliefs was stimulating women to take up activities outside the home. When it came to the war and the military, ER certainly envisioned highly skilled and motivated women who could do their part well.

As the spouse of the President, ER was in a powerful position and she used that position as effectively as she could. The archival documents in the file of correspondence with WAC director Oveta Culp Hobby showed how ER used her contacts within the
government (in this instance, the Army) to address issues concerning women. The letters exhibit that American citizens thought she could help them with applying for the WAC, how ER promoted the Corps with her visits, that she questioned racial segregation and tried to relieve the situation of the Japanese-Americans in the internment camps. These examples were relatively specific but represent ER's general attitudes very well. In addition, they show that these activities that took place out of the view of the public allowed ER her practical implementation of what she put forward in her public speeches and articles.
CONCLUSION

The objective for this thesis was two tiered: the first chapter aimed to show the development of ER's life and character into a remarkable First Lady. The second and third chapters argued that ER used that position as First Lady to challenge the norm that women solely belonged at home. ER had risen from her Victorian background into a social reformer. She became one of the pivotal figures in American women's history to promote women's independence, and her ideas helped feed the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Arguments for feminist issues, coinciding with those for the civil rights movement, did not appear from thin air and were carried over by social activists like ER. ER herself, however, disliked being called a feminist. The overarching question that arises, then, is whether ER would fit into the category of "feminist" woman. Despite contradicting elements in her persona, the conclusion has to be that she did fit in.

The roots of Eleanor's and Franklin's Roosevelt branches of the families lay deeply in the elite Victorian structures of American history. In this milieu women were cast into the role of mother and helpmate wife. ER's life until the death of her husband was greatly determined by her husband's career. In public it was not required for her to form her own opinion or earn her own money. If she had chosen to, it would have been acceptable if she remained out of political life entirely, only appearing at FDR's side. An additional restriction on ER's situation had been Sara Delano Roosevelt, her mother-in-law who died just before her eighty-seventh birthday in 1941, when ER was already 57 years old. Sara Delano
Roosevelt had always competed for her only son's attention with her daughter-in-law, causing ER to seek refuge at Val-Kill.

As was customary at the time, ER was referred to as Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, something she did not object to. She often acted in the role of his helpmate wife, a custom that was greatly exaggerated by his paralysis in later life. When he campaigned for governor and President, she was there to support him or appear in lieu of him. In private letters, but also in public, she voiced her loyalty and duty to her husband. Even when she talked about her own initiatives, she used her marriage as a cover. A direct consequence of that attitude was her denial of being a politician. Her modesty deceived her contemporaries and also historians to a certain degree. They remembered her as the friendly and caring woman she was.

In spite of this feminine and restricted side of ER, there was also the liberal and progressive side to her that attributed great power to women as independent individuals. In her late youth this independence manifested itself initially as a result of her education at Allenswood, England. Many other factors such as the lack of intimacy within her marriage and the close friendships with women created an even greater will to find her own position in the world. Particularly women such as Molly Dewson, Esther Lape, Elizabeth Read and Lorena Hickok provided ER with examples of life outside marriage and were models as feminists fighting for women's equality.

Personal and emotional hardships in her youth, but also as an adult, hardened ER. Her intelligence, and what psychologists called a self-actualized personality, made her turn the focus outwards. She was concerned about - and dedicated most of her life to - the highest human ideals. Those ideals were often not only firmly rooted in Democratic Party
politics but more often rose above partisan politics. The key topics that she was known to promote better standards for were democracy, human equality in many shapes and forms, creating new economic and educational possibilities for the individual, solidarity among all members of the human race and providing chances for youth movements. One of the most interesting aspects of her personality but also the hardest to define, is the fusion of this idealism with ER's realism and the capacity for success as a politician. Her writings, however, enjoyed great popularity and her presence carried great weight. Removing the feminine veil that she draped over her assertions provides a look into an extraordinary political career that spanned more than half a century.

The second and third chapters of this thesis lifted out two narrower strands in ER's thinking: her views on women at work and women in the military during WWII. Her thinking on these two issues displayed ER's personality, contradictions and strategies very well. In her mind it was important that women changed their mentality from an exclusively family minded one to a broader attitude. Women had to believe that they were capable of independent, self-sufficient lives. In the case of the defense effort, this meant that ER was convinced that women played a pivotal function outside strictly feminine roles in the war. She challenged existing gender conventions by stimulating women to do skilled wage work and join the female branches of the military. To a certain degree her First Ladyship was at stake when she made such stirring statements. The risk did not deter her, and her unrelenting efforts showed her skill to maneuver around polarizing points. Not only did she have to call upon women to take action but also convince men on executive levels to accept women in these new roles. One way to achieve this goal was to support women in government offices.
Immediately after the war, society moved in the opposite direction in its outlook on women's equality and it was not until two decades later, shortly after ER's death in 1962, that second wave feminism made women begin to consciously question women's roles. Feminist writers such as Betty Friedan with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) overtly sought to do so in the second half of the twentieth century.

What is it that makes a person a feminist? Connotations to the word are sometimes negative, defeating the movement's objectives. In the broadest sense, being a woman and living consciously with a woman-centered outlook could be called feminist. ER was definitely very conscious of her womanhood and the consequences that brought for her in her career. Her role as mother and wife was very important to her, as it would be to other women as well. This awareness resonated strongly in her call for women to join the labor force or even join the military. Her opposition to the ERA and her effort for better housing and child care facilities were designed to help women to carry those responsibilities, not abandon them. Feminism also has the reputation of being anti-men. ER had no desire to attack men negatively. She rather stressed the complementary roles men and women had in society and family. Members of both sexes were different but equally valuable.

Feminism is not an easy category to define. Its dimensions have changed greatly over time and played out differently in countries and areas: cultural, political, economic, theoretical, linguistic, and literary. The noun "feminism" did not enter the English language until the 1890s. In its most basic meaning, feminism is a social movement that fights the undervaluing of women in societies where the sexes are divided in two different spheres. At the same time, feminists believe that women have the possibility of changing their social place. ER had lived through the time that feminism made the transition to the call for legal
and economic equality after the right to vote had been achieved. After WWI pacifism had entered the discussion as well, and it was here that ER started to fit in. In connection to the New Deal, feminist anti-poverty campaigns were launched that could be characterized as "welfare feminism." In the 1960s feminism was made more personal and extended to the body, emotions and sexuality. ER did not live into the era when radical statements fanned the fires of the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.149

During the decades of the 1930s and the 1940s, the feminist movement had split into roughly 3 branches. The first was a more elitist group that believed in full legal equality, arguing that protective labor laws only for women were in the end harmful. Various members of elitist parties such as the NWP raised an additional concern; they opposed protective labor legislation because they believed it was unnecessary in the free market. A second group within the feminist movement had in mind to try to get women in powerful positions in the government, a response to achievement of women's right to vote. Key members of the Democratic and Republican Parties were particularly keen to see women appointed to governmental posts. In contrast to the first group, large number of these women did not approve of the ERA. It was to this second group that black female reformers connected as well. A third group had women's economic opportunities in mind and pushed for protective legislation, in opposition to ERA supporters. Particularly working class women were the beneficiaries of those laws because they had to be protected from exploitation. The New Deal appealed to these feminists because there was a role for the government to help individuals in need and at the same time regulating free enterprise.

Union organizers such as the WTUL, NCL and others loosely fitted together in this third group.150

As a member of the Democratic Party and wife of New Deal President FDR, ER matched well with both the second and third feminist categories. They were generally not radical feminists, but they did have as a primary focus the interest of women. A hundred years after ER's birth, The New York Times published an article entitled "Assessing Eleanor Roosevelt as a Feminist," coming to the conclusion that she indeed had been a feminist. The 900 attendees at a 1984 conference of the American Association of University Women and associated organizations, erupted in assenting applause when the American Margaret Papandreou, at that moment wife of the Greek Prime Minister, asserted in her speech that ER "was a feminist, a liberal feminist, for her times." But to many her strongly voiced opposition to the ERA made calling her a feminist problematic. According to the article, several others attending the conference recognized ER's feminism despite the issue of the ERA. She was praised for her achievements in the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt administration. Her life had been a positive role model for women in the U.S. and around the world.

One notable guest at the conference was Betty Friedan. Friedan "excused" ER for not supporting the ERA because in her time the labor conditions for women were different; women often worked in vulnerable factory jobs. ER wanted to protect those women. In Friedan's opinion ER was a "great, great woman who continued to develop and evolve, and who was able to break through the feminine mystique [emphasis added] and achieve real levels of greatness." A real compliment from the person who coined "feminine mystique" as the

150 Harrison, On Account of Sex, 7-12.
notion of the American woman's confinement to the home. She went on to say that ER "set a standard that no other First Lady has even tried to live up to." Since 1984 this situation has changed with the coming of Hillary Rodham Clinton to the White House and her current run for the Presidency. Even Elizabeth Chittick, successor to Alice Paul as head of the NWP, thought ER was a great lady, noting that: "if Eleanor Roosevelt had lived a little longer, I think she would have seen the light" regarding the need for an ERA.\textsuperscript{151}

With a long career in New York and Washington, D.C., politics, ER was able to contribute greatly to feminist initiatives through her extensive political network. Her views were especially influential because she was in close proximity to the President, who trusted her judgment. Family and personal hardships over which she had no control shaped Eleanor Roosevelt's personality. Her family background also functioned as a springboard into elite reform movements and her husband's career assisted her own career as well. These outside influences coupled with her own choice to fight for the greater good of American society produced a powerful mix that resulted in Mrs. Roosevelt, the First Lady of formidable political stature.


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## APPENDIX 1

### LABOR FORCE

Matthew Sobek

**TABLE AFI-14** Labor force participation rate, by cohort, age, and sex: 1801–1980

Contributed by Matthew Sobek

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### Source

Tabulated from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS); see the Guide to the Millennial Edition.

### Documentation

Prior to 1940, labor force participation means gainful employment (that is, whether a person claimed an occupation). The requirement for claiming an occupation were never entirely systemized and they varied over time. Consequently, the pre-1940 figures are less consistent than more recent statistics. Starting in 1940, labor force participation was formalized to mean working or seeking work in the week prior to the census. The switch from the gainful employment to the labor force definition has significant implications for new, seasonal, part-time, and female workers.


The unique wording of the occupation question in 1910 yielded high labor force participation rates for women in that census. The census year from which a particular statistic was derived can be determined using the combination of birth year and age.