

WOMEN WHO MADE HISTORY



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Eleanor Roosevelt on the “Four Basic Rights”

BY ALLIDA M. BLACK

Fear, tinged by hope, permeated the United States as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) drafted a response to a letter about segregation in 1944. President Franklin Roosevelt had told the world in 1941 that the war against fascism was a global battle to preserve the Four Freedoms—freedom of speech and worship and freedom from want and fear. Eleanor Roosevelt focused on the fight to preserve and expand democracy at home for all Americans, no matter their gender or race.

By May 1944, it looked as though the Allies could win World War II. Allied forces were driving the German army out of Italy, but they had not yet liberated Europe, and the war raged in the Pacific. Every day, hundreds of American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were killed or wounded. Every day their families and friends learned the news.

At home, Americans struggled with the vast changes a total war effort introduced to American society. Millions of women worked outside the home for the first time doing the work men usually did: building ships, planes, radar equipment, tanks, and guns, and making nitroglycerin. Six million African Americans relocated to find jobs and help in the war effort. While overtime pay and full employment raised wages, rationing limited the goods people could buy.

Tensions simmered beneath the surface. The home front seemed to ricochet between heartfelt patriotism and increased racial tension. Japanese Americans, much to Eleanor Roosevelt’s dismay, had their property sold out from under them and were forced to relocate to barbed-wire–enclosed internment camps. African Americans, who had enlisted in record numbers, fought in segregated units and, when wounded, could not receive plasma that had been created from Caucasian blood. In the summer of 1943, race riots shook the nation. In California, interned Japanese Americans, loyal to the United States, rose up to protest their confinement. In Detroit, white citizens, angered by the construction of housing for black defense workers, ransacked black neighborhoods.

Eleanor Roosevelt was deeply associated with support for both Japanese Americans and African Americans. She had argued against internment and for the funds that could move black defense workers out of snow-covered tents and into small apartments. The country and the press gave her “a pass” on internment but railed against her support of African Americans in Detroit.

Her six-week trip to visit the troops in the Pacific in 1943 only reaffirmed her commitment to democracy and social justice. She began to carry a prayer in her wallet that read, “Dear Lord, Lest I continue my complacent way, help me to remember that somewhere, somehow out there a man died for me today. As long as there be war, I then must ask and answer am I worth dying for?”

On April 26, 1944, a woman named Addie Frizelle wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt. She had moved to Washington, DC, from Oklahoma “to do a war job,” but after a series of incidents, she was returning home “where the negroes and the white people heretofore have been friends, albeit the negroes have not been allowed to brush elbows continually with white people, use the same restrooms, etc. . . . I wonder,” she asked, “if you know just what you are doing by advocating so strongly the social equality between the negro and white people? . . . Give this some thought,” she concluded, “and try to put yourself in the other person’s place.”¹

When Eleanor Roosevelt read this letter, she scrawled “Dictate” across the top of it and placed it in a pile she would later hand to her secretary. She wanted to address her concerns personally and forthrightly rather than send on a formulaic response.

Eleanor cared deeply about democracy and the sacrifices the military and their families were making to preserve it. As she told a dear friend, the war “fills me with the greatest sense of obligation I feel I will never be able to discharge.”²

She also understood on a gut level the irony of fighting fascism and preserving Jim Crow. As she championed Marian Anderson’s right to sing at the Lincoln Memorial, she asked America why they cursed Hitler but refused to allow Anderson to perform in a public auditorium.

To Eleanor Roosevelt, democracy did not tolerate discrimination. As she told the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, whose landmark book *American Dilemma* was released the week Frizelle wrote her letter, “we cannot hide our problems like skeletons in a closet.”³ America’s actions, Roosevelt insisted, would determine whether democracy faded or grew.

1. Addie Frizelle to Eleanor Roosevelt, April 26, 1944.

2. Eleanor Roosevelt to Doris Fleeson, October 4, 1943, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D Roosevelt Presidential Library.

3. Ralph J. Bunche, Memo on interview with Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt in the White House, May 15, 1940, Myrdal Study, Senate Interviews File, Ralph J. Bunche Papers, Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles. See also Allida Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 88–89.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

May 13, 1944

Dear Miss Frizelle:

I have not advocated social equality between colored and white people. That is a personal thing which nobody can advocate. Nobody can tell me whom I shall have inside my house, any more than I can tell others.

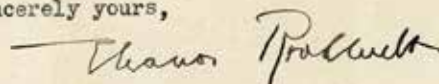
The only things which I have advocated are four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot.

Questions beyond that are personal things and people must decide them for themselves.

I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights.

If you have to use the same toilets and wash basins where you work, then all of you must have to take physical examinations, in which case I think you are safe as you would be in any place where a great many people are coming and going. If you are nervous, there are certain precautions which you can always take.

Sincerely yours,



*A letter from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizelle, May 13, 1944.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09544)*

She knew this was not a safe position to advance. Threats on her life increased. White supremacists vilified her in print and the Ku Klux Klan used her as a recruitment tool. Thus, she took care in responding to Frizelle's criticisms.

Democracy, Roosevelt understood, is based on laws that promote legal equality—not social equality. No law could force anyone to like or love someone else. What the law should do is promote the basic rights essential to building a democracy and preparing its people to be effective citizens. That means every citizen—no matter their gender, race, family background, region, or age—must have the same rights for democracy to survive and flourish.

"The only things which I have advocated," she told Frizelle, "are four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot."⁴

These rights defined Eleanor Roosevelt's concept of democracy just as Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms defined his hope for a postwar world.

Four years later, in 1948, she strove to have these rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Twelve years later, as the Ku Klux Klan placed a bounty on her head, she urged America to realize that "we are all on trial to show what democracy means." As she lay dying, she continued to urge Americans to apply these rights. "Staying aloof," she insisted, "is not a solution; it is a cowardly evasion."⁵

4. Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizelle, May 13, 1944, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09544.

5. Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow Is Now: It Is Today That We Must Create the World of the Future*, ed. Allida Black (New York: Penguin, 2012), 22.