

Eleanor Roosevelt, "Preserving Civil Liberties," Speech before the Civil Liberties Committee, Chicago, Illinois, March 14, 1940 (abridged)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

. . . we have come here tonight because of civil liberties. . . . I am more conscious of the importance of civil liberties in this particular moment of our history than anyone else, because as I travel through the country and meet people and see things that have happened to little people, I realize what it means to democracy to preserve our civil liberties.

All through the years we have had to fight for civil liberty, and we know that there are times when the light grows rather dim, and every time that happens democracy is in danger. Now, largely because of the troubled state of the world as a whole, civil liberties have disappeared in many other countries. . . . And so we know that here in this country, we have a grave responsibility. We are at peace. We have no reason for the fears which govern so many other peoples throughout the world; therefore, we have to guard the freedoms of democracy.

"Civil Liberties" emphasizes the liberty of the individual. In many other forms of governments . . . the individual lives for the state. Here in a democracy, the government still exists for the individual, but that does not mean that we do not have to watch and that we do not have to examine ourselves to be sure that we preserve the civil liberties for all our people, which are the basis of our democracy. . . . we know that everywhere in this country every person who believes in democracy has come to feel a real responsibility to work in his community and to know the people of his community, and to take the trouble to try to bring about the full observance for all our people of their civil liberties.

. . . I sometimes am much worried by the tendency that you find today in our country only to think that (freedom of the press and freedom of speech) are rights for the people who think as we do. Some people seem to think these rights are not for people who disagree with them. I believe that you must apply to all groups the right to all forms of thought, to all forms of expression. Otherwise, you practically refuse to trust people to choose for themselves what is wise and what is right, and in doing that you deny the possibility of a democratic form of government. You have to be willing to listen or to allow people to state any point of view they may have, to say anything they may believe, and trust that when everyone has had his say . . . in the end the majority of the people will have the wisdom to decide what is right. We have to have faith that even when the majority seems to decide as we think wrongly, we still believe the fundamental principles that we have laid down, and we wait for the day to come when the thing that we believe is right becomes the majority decision of the people.

. . . The minute we deny any rights . . . to any citizen, we are preparing the way for the denial of those rights to someone else. Never before was it so important that every individual should carry his share of responsibility and see that we do obey the laws, live up to the Constitution, and preserve every one of those precious liberties which leave us free as individuals.

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