

Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady for Social Justice

The following readings are excerpts taken from documents written by or about Eleanor Roosevelt.

Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education

Pictorial Review 31 (April 1930)

What is the purpose of education? This question agitates scholars, teachers, statesmen, every group, in fact, of thoughtful men and women . . . “the true purpose of education is to produce citizens.” If this is the goal-and in a democracy it would seem at least an important part of the ultimate achievement-then we must examine our educational system from a new point of view . . .

. . . A nation must have leaders, men who have the power to see a little farther, to imagine a little better life than the present. But if this vision is to be fulfilled, it must also have a vast army of men and women capable of understanding and following these leaders intelligently. These citizens must understand their government from the smallest election district to the highest administrative office. It must be no closed book to them, and each one must carry his own particular responsibility or the whole army will lag.

In Defense of Curiosity

The Saturday Evening Post (August 24, 1935)

A short time ago a cartoon appeared depicting two miners looking up in surprise and saying with undisguised horror, “Here comes Mrs. Roosevelt!” In strange and subtle ways, it was indicated to me that I should feel somewhat ashamed of that cartoon, and there certainly was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much.

Somehow or other, most of the people who spoke to me, or wrote to me about it, seemed to feel that it was unbecoming in a woman to have a variety of interests. Perhaps that arose from the old inherent theory that woman's interests must lie only in her home. This is a kind of blindness which seems to make people feel that interest in the home stops within the four walls of the house in which you live. Few seem capable of realizing that the real reason that home is important is that it is so closely tied, by a million strings, to the rest of the world. That is what makes it an important factor in the life of every nation . . .

. . . So many of us resent what we consider the waste of war, but if in each home there is no curiosity to follow the trend of affairs in various nations and our own conduct toward them, how can we expect to understand where our interests clash or to know whether our Government's policies are fair and just or generally selfish?

A Challenge to American Sportsmanship

Collier's 112 (October 16, 1943)

. . . Now we come to Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. There was no time to investigate (Japanese-American) families or to adhere strictly to the American rule that a man is innocent until he is proved guilty. These people were not convicted of any crime, but emotions ran too high. Too many people wanted to wreak vengeance on Oriental-looking people. Even the Chinese, our allies, were not always safe from insult on the streets. The Japanese had long been watched by the F.B.I., as were other aliens, and several hundred were apprehended at once on the outbreak of war and sent to detention camps. . .

. . . Understandable bitterness against the Japanese is aggravated by the old-time economic fear on the West Coast and the unreasoning racial feeling which certain people, through ignorance, have always had wherever they came in contact with people who were different from themselves. . .

. . . “A Japanese is always a Japanese” is an easily accepted phrase and it has taken hold quite naturally on the West Coast because of some reasonable or unreasonable fear back of it, but it leads nowhere and solves nothing. Japanese-Americans may be no more Japanese than a German-American is German, or an Italian-American is Italian. All of these people,

including the Japanese-Americans, have men who are fighting today for the preservation of the democratic way of life and the ideas around which our nation was built.

We have no common race in this country, but we have an ideal to which all of us are loyal. It is our ideal which we want to have live. It is an ideal which can grow with our people, but we cannot progress if we look down upon any group of people among us because of race or religion. Every citizen in this country has a right to our basic freedoms, to justice and to equality of opportunity, and we retain the right to lead our individual lives as we please, but we can only do so if we grant to others the freedoms that we wish for ourselves.

Old Age Pensions

Social Security (February 8, 1934)

I do not feel that I have to discuss the merits of old age pensions with my audience. We have come beyond that because it is many years now since we have accepted the fact, I think, pretty well throughout the country, that it is the right of old people when they have worked hard all their lives, and, through no fault of theirs, have not been able to provide for their old age, to be cared for in the last years of their life. We did it at first in what I consider a terrible way—through poorhouses—but now we have become more humane and more enlightened, and little by little we are passing old age pension laws in the various states . . .

. . . But we have an age limit: the age limit is 70 in New York State and I think that is a bad feature. I have found that in many cases where people have appealed to me much suffering might have been saved if it had been possible to have more elasticity. There are people at 70 who are better able to get along than some people at 65 or even 60, and it seems to me that in considering a law there should be some arrangement made for flexibility as to age and some other consideration besides age alone . . .

. . . And that is what an old age security law will do. It will allow the old people to end their days in happiness, and it will take the burden from the younger people who often have all the struggle that they can stand . . . *For that reason I believe that this bill will be a model bill and pass without any opposition this year.*

Race, Religion and Prejudice Eleanor Roosevelt Reacts to Segregation

New Republic 106 (May 11, 1942)

. . . Perhaps because the Negroes are our largest minority, our attitude towards them will have to be faced first of all. I keep on repeating that the way to face this situation is by being completely realistic. We cannot force people to accept friends for whom they have no liking, but living in a democracy it is entirely reasonable to demand that every citizen of that democracy enjoy the fundamental rights of a citizen. Over and over again, I have stressed the rights of every citizen:

Equality before the law.
Equality of education.
Equality to hold a job according to his ability.
Equality of participation through the ballot in the government.

These are inherent rights in a democracy, and I do not see how we can fight this war and deny these rights to any citizen in our own land . . .

Eleanor Roosevelt Reacts to Segregation

Oral History Interview with Modjeska Simkins, May 11, 1990. (Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

In this excerpt, Mokjeska Simkins remembers attending a meeting in strictly segregated Birmingham, Alabama, which Eleanor Roosevelt also attended. Roosevelt dramatized her opposition to segregation by measuring the distance between the black and white sections of the meeting site and sitting precisely between them.

JOHN EGERTON: (Interviewer)

Ms. Roosevelt came to both of those meetings. She was in Birmingham in 1938 and then she came up to Chattanooga in 1940.

MODJESKA SIM KINS:

I'll tell you about something that happened inaudible last year. You know about Birmingham, the strict separation of races and their law, I don't know whether it was the law of Alabama, it certainly was something in the city council. Negroes and whites were not to meet in the same place unless there was a physical barrier.

JOHN EGERTON:

Right, separated, had to sit separately.

MODJESKA SIM KINS:

Yes, they had to have a barrier between them. That's the way Anne Braden got the title for her book.

JOHN EGERTON:

The Wall Between, yes.

MODJESKA SIM KINS:

It was suppose to be a natural barrier.

JOHN EGERTON:

Yes.

MODJESKA SIM KINS:

We went to that courthouse, have you even been to the courthouse in Birmingham? It's not like our courthouse here, our courthouse. . . . This is the courthouse floor in Birmingham, now here's the center and on each side of this great big inaudible , now in Columbia, we have a big center and a plank on each side. Now in Birmingham, it's absolutely divided in half. When Ms. Roosevelt got there and they told her, evidently somebody whispered to her, I met Ms. Roosevelt, I was in close proximity to her once or twice, she looked like a person who would just say something knowing it was going to be kind of funny or kind of picking on something. Somebody told Ms. Roosevelt about that division, that physical barrier. So when she went in, and Seymore told me, she went in and went directly to the black section. I don't know whether she got to sit down or anything but she went in that direction. They got her from there and told her she would have to sit on the other side. She moved over there and they got her on down and out of the way from where she was going inaudible . We were kind of together out in front of the inaudible building and she said bring me a chair. That's just the way she talked—bring me a chair. Now bring me a ruler.

JOHN EGERTON:

A ruler.

MODJESKA SIM KINS:

They brought her the yardstick. She said, "Now measure from that chair to this chair." And they did that not knowing where she was coming from. She said, "Now find the mark half way between us, and put an x." which they did. "Now bring me a chair." And she told them to set it so the middle of the chair was over that x. I was telling the crowd about it so and I said Mrs. Roosevelt sat in that chair over that x with one of her hands on one side of that x and one of hands on the other. That's the way she sat the whole meeting. Yes, she did.

Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Anne Hinkley July 17, 1932 (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

I have never joined the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, because as you know, I am a dry . . . I recognize, of course, that Prohibition has not worked well and I am entirely willing to see the 18th Amendment repealed and to have the states given the power to pass what laws they deem necessary . . .

From my point of view, prohibition has done more harm in encouraging a group of people who are law breakers and in creating a new and illegal way of making fortunes.