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Haley Butler
Santa Clara University

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Eleanor Roosevelt, Setting the Stage for the Future

Haley Butler

Amidst copious backlash, Hillary Clinton displayed a deep interest in involving herself in her husband's presidency and voicing her strong opinions. However, First Ladies did not always have their own initiative and ability to voice their political opinions. Historically, they managed domestic and social affairs. They held no official role other than to host social events, greet dignitaries, and aid their husband's in creating connections to strengthen his presidency. In a political arena dominated by men, women's opinions were deemed unworthy and unnecessary. This all changed during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and his wife, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt. The press named her "First Lady of the World."¹ She spoke out for minorities and advocated for human rights. She was never afraid to voice her true opinions when necessary. She was a revolutionary new type of First Lady that America had never seen before, especially in regard to her use of the press. Her effective use of media allowed her to appear non-threatening to the role of American men and the American family ideal by showing women could hold dual roles in society while still not encroaching over the line of equality. In addition to acting as a wife, she had opinions and participated in politics. She used the media to try and change the public mindset on how women should behave in political conversation. Mrs. Roosevelt would transform the role of First Lady in the White House permanently. She set a precedent for First Ladies to have no qualms against being political if they chose to do so and avidly pressed for them to take action if necessary.

Although Eleanor Roosevelt had always been an independent woman, she did take some time to find herself. She struggled to find a balance between the political life she craved and the

¹ "Mrs. Roosevelt Cited for Aid to Humanity," *The New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

homemaker role that she knew she needed to fulfill.² Although she did not come into her political prime until later in her life, reporters began to see her as a powerful figure even before her husband's rise to president. A reporter interviewing Mrs. Roosevelt described her as, "first of all a domestic woman, but she has one outside interest... That is politics."³ Mrs. Roosevelt had found an area of expertise that she could flourish in while still maintaining the role of mother and wife. She presented herself as if she was not connected to politics but eventually her political nature would come to light. In his biography of Mrs. Roosevelt, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship*, author Joseph Lash wrote, "Not only was she the governor's wife and a political power in her own right, but, most important of all, she was a useful champion when their own programs were in trouble—or when they wanted the governor's support for new ideas."⁴ Mrs. Roosevelt possessed noticeable power, but she would never admit to her strength as that would have stepped too far past the bounds of a traditional woman. She needed to strike a correct balance between policy and family values to gain the favor of the people around her. A balance that allowed her opinions to aid the others around her while not seeming overbearing and overly forceful. In addition to this necessary balance, she would need an outlet conveyor for her opinions to be facilitated to the public which would come in the form of the media.

Mrs. Roosevelt's relationship with the female media proved to be one of her most important in regard to her personal image. In particular, Lorena Hickock, a journalist for the Associated Press, famously had an extremely close relationship with Mrs. Roosevelt which would come to be one of her most important and influential

² Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

³ Quoted in Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: The Story of Their Relationship, Based on Eleanor Roosevelt's Private Papers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 252.

⁴ Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 355.

friendships. Lorena was said to have been the “the first journalist to recognize Eleanor Roosevelt’s news making potential.”⁵ Their friendship would benefit each of them greatly as both would attain more recognition through their combined thinking of new ways to influence the media.⁶ In February of 1934, Hickock and Eleanor went on a trip to the Caribbean along with several other female journalists. Ms. Hickok taught her how to express herself properly to the press, orchestrating many photo opportunities and talks with the media. Mrs. Roosevelt used this trip to show her concern for the less fortunate. Mrs. Roosevelt would maintain this public appearance by taking part in photoshoots when she gave lectures, visited school children, and met migrant workers, thereby spreading her frequent and ceaseless activity to the general public.⁷ Through the advice of Ms. Hickok, Mrs. Roosevelt held frequent press conferences in the White House solely for female reporters to nurture a mutually beneficial relationship with the press.⁸ Initially the conferences dealt with menial things such as Mrs. Roosevelt’s daily schedule yet, as time went on, the female reporters asked for more in-depth information to give to the public. As time progressed, she went on to discuss many issues that were more political in nature. Not only would she discuss her own views, in addition, she would bring in dignitaries and politicians to give outside opinions as well.⁹ Mrs. Roosevelt nurtured an almost symbiotic relationship with the female press. One journalist described these conferences as “a group of school-girls gathered at the feet of their beloved principal.”¹⁰ She saw these conferences as

⁵ Diana Knott Martinelli & Shannon A. Bowen, “The Public Relations Work of Journalism Trailblazer and First Lady Confidante Lorena Hickok, 1937- 45,” *Journalism History* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 132.

⁶ *Ibid*, 133.

⁷ *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Directed by Sue Williams. (PBS, 2000), Kanopy.

⁸ Martinelli & Bowen, “The Public Relations Work,” 133.

⁹ Nancy Woloch, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House Press Conferences,” National Women’s History Museum, September 22, 2017.

¹⁰ Lorian K. Francis, “Mrs. Roosevelt Quits the Front Page,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 23, 1935.

an opportunity to give female reporters the step into equality that they needed to be seen as legitimate in the journalism sphere. These journalists in return praised Mrs. Roosevelt and spread her opinions in their articles.¹¹ These were the opportunities that they needed to become equal to their male cohorts. These conferences became so famous that the women who attended were given the name “hen-press”.¹² Mrs. Roosevelt saw that the people who read about what she said during these conferences gained a greater interest in what went on in the White House and saw a more pressing need for female journalists.¹³ These press conferences became a necessary source of information for pressing issues of the time and the female press took the advantage they were given. The relationship that Mrs. Roosevelt created benefited her greatly and benefited the public. She gained greater attention in the newspaper and the people gained a greater understanding of her as a person and White House business as well.

Her most effective use of media first came to fruition on December 31st, 1935. At the advising of her trusted confidant, Lorena Hickok, Mrs. Roosevelt began writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column entitled “My Day.”¹⁴ It gave the American people a look into the daily life of the First Lady and the people involved in her life. Initially, the column included menial things like day to day activities and musings of the First Lady, yet it still played an important role in connecting the First Lady to the public. In 1938, she became much more open about her political opinions and her ability to make a difference in America.¹⁵ She backed her husband’s policies when she felt necessary, yet she was never afraid to say when she disagreed. She became known for the tone and look in her eyes directed at Mr. Roosevelt that displayed

¹¹ Woloch, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s White House Press Conferences.”

¹² Francis, “Mrs. Roosevelt Quits the Front Page.”

¹³ Francesca McKenney, “Conferences with Press Stimulate Public Interest,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1936.

¹⁴ Martinelli & Bowen, “The Public Relations Work,” 133.

¹⁵ “About the My Day Project,” *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project*.

her displeasure with his decisions and opinions.¹⁶ In her column, Mrs. Roosevelt freely fought for many causes from her husband's New Deal plan to the rights of African Americans, and the importance and inevitability of fighting in World War II.¹⁷ Mrs. Roosevelt praised the role of a housewife and a strong mother figure, but also a woman with political opinions showing that women can hold both roles at the same time. Equality was necessary during times of struggle and change. She called for women to understand their necessary part in American politics in her February 3, 1936 column writing, "Many women feel that they are so unimportant that their action can count little for good or ill, but it is the mass of individuals that makes up public opinion and public opinion is what runs a democracy!"¹⁸ Mrs. Roosevelt reasserted that women could and should be political participants. She believed in the empowerment of women in a time where women predominantly felt they had little to no political power. She believed the world success necessitated women becoming active in politics and the "My Day" column gave her a vehicle to voice those opinions and connect to disenfranchised women directly. The "My Day" column was an outlet for Mrs. Roosevelt that improved her image immensely. The American public was not familiar with the experience of getting a daily account of what a First Lady did and thought. She effectively connected with the people in ways that they had never experienced. They gained an inside look into her views and her influence spread massively as "My Day" proved to be extremely popular and it slowly became one of America's most popular news columns.¹⁹ Her ability to connect with the public became one of her strongest suits and necessary for her to maintain the reputation she had created for herself. Mrs.

¹⁶ *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Directed by Sue Williams.

¹⁷ "About the My Day Project."

¹⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, February 3, 1936," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017).

¹⁹ "About the My Day Project."

Roosevelt's use of the media would give her a reputation as formidable political player.

Mrs. Roosevelt was not one to shy away from causes and issues she felt needed her support. An independent woman at heart, she had no reason to accept and support viewpoints that she wholeheartedly did not agree upon. Lorania K. Francis writes for the *Los Angeles Times*, "Her personal creed is based on the belief that 'I wouldn't be true to myself if I didn't stick to my ideas.' And she grants a like privilege to her attackers. In consequence, attacking Mrs. Roosevelt is rather like the old, old story of 'an irresistible force meeting an immovable object.' Nothing happens."²⁰ Mrs. Roosevelt believed that her personal beliefs were powerful against others and their attacks did not phase her. Francis correctly argues that when others around her did not agree, Mrs. Roosevelt believed that her true opinions would prove them wrong. She cared for all minority groups whether they be African Americans or low wage laborers. Everyone deserved the chance to be seen as equal in society; a revolutionary belief at the time as many promoted social segregation and distinct class differences. She understood the necessary part that everyone played in a well-functioning society and wanted everyone else to understand that as well. In her "My Day" column, she wrote about how migrant workers received unfair treatment in America for too long. She argued for the American people to recognize the importance of migrant workers and stressed the importance of equal treatment. She wrote, "I am filled with shame" when discussing the horrendous conditions, they were forced to endure. Further on, she wrote about how the need to fight for better treatment and protection of rights for these workers.²¹ Mrs. Roosevelt stood for human rights and believed no matter what race, gender, or class, everyone deserved equal opportunity and equal rights in the eyes of the government. She openly fought for civil rights and

²⁰ Francis, "Mrs. Roosevelt Quits the Front Page."

²¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, June 7, 1945," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017).

promotion of anti-discrimination which other politicians decided were not as important as Mrs. Roosevelt believed.

With topics such as these, disagreement became natural. When FDR did not make more efficient moves to forward the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill in 1934, she fought back. FDR hesitated to support the bill due to his support base from Southern voters. If they believed he was too liberal, he would lose the next election.²² She saw FDR's hesitation to push the bill forward and found her own support in the form of Walter White, an important civil rights leader at the time. She supported White and his cause, frustrating others around her. Despite FDR's protests, she continued to support White and the fight for anti-discrimination as civil rights became one of her main causes of interest. More issues spawned from this event causing even more backlash from others around her, yet she did not let up.²³ Shocking the nation, she resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution due to their allowance and passive promotion of discrimination. She announced her resignation in her "My Day" column on February 27, 1939. Poised and refined, she did not mention the name of the organization, but she did strike at them writing, "if you belong to an organization and disapprove of an action which is typical of a policy, should you resign or is better to work for a changed point of view within the organization?...I belong to an organization in which I can do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning."²⁴ She could have remained silent but refused complacency as she understood that silence was comparable to affirmation. When given the chance, she would speak her mind in subtle ways that were not overtly aggressive. Her open support of civil rights went

²² "NAACP History: Costigan Wagner Bill." *NAACP*.

²³ "Eleanor Roosevelt and Civil Rights," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017).

²⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, February 27, 1939," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017).

against her husband's wishes and his support system, yet she followed her own passions. In the face of pushback, she voiced her opinions without hesitation if the cause truly deserved her support and would benefit the public.

Mrs. Roosevelt's continued outspoken nature did get her in to trouble in certain instances. Despite the support she gained for her views, her many public roles in American society and her lack of caution with voicing her liberal opinions faced backlash. At the time of her husband's election, she faced criticism for not resigning from her job as a teacher at the school of which she retained part-ownership. Critics argued that she could not have jobs other than First Lady. Typically, her opponents were far right leaning republicans who believed she and her husband were too politically liberal for the good of America. At one time, critics charged her with stealing gas that could have been utilized by civilians to visit army troops in the Caribbean even though FDR insisted she visit.²⁵

Even simple things such as her choice of verbiage in her articles or speeches faced criticism and analysis. Lynn U. Stambaugh, the Commander of the American Legion, ridiculed her for arguing that World War II should be fought for a "changed world". Stambaugh argued that Mrs. Roosevelt had lost touch with the opinions of the American population. He argued that the war should be fought to "preserve the world we have known."²⁶ Stambaugh misconstrued her words to make her seem out of touch with the population when in truth, she argued for a better world for the American people. In essence, they both wanted the same thing however Stambaugh chose to attack Mrs. Roosevelt because of his disagreement with her choice of words. One of her most avid critics, a journalist named Westbrook Pegler wrote numerous articles criticizing her beliefs and role in the White House. He

²⁵ Marquis Childs, "Washington Calling: Attacks on Mrs. Roosevelt" *The Washington Post*, 20 April 1944.

²⁶ "Eleanor Roosevelt Rebuked by National Chief of Legion," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 1942.

framed her as greedy, taking advantage of FDR and the power and wealth that came along with him. He claimed she lied about her donations of her salary to charity, therefore claiming she was profiting off her role as First Lady.²⁷ He made comparisons between her and Hitler.²⁸ He also attacked her for her role as a journalist and questioned whether she had the correct qualifications to be one. He called for her eligibility to be taken away from her due to journalism not being her “principal role.”²⁹ Another attack claiming she could not have more positions other than First Lady.

Even after the death of FDR, critics continued to attack Mrs. Roosevelt for her beliefs during her time as First Lady. In 1950, A famous Christian minister, Gerald L. K. Smith, famously attacked FDR, Mrs. Roosevelt, and the policies that they supported, especially the New Deal.³⁰ Smith attacked her and her beliefs on numerous occasions, even going so far as to pen an open letter to her in his book, *Too Much and Too Many Roosevelts*. Smith first began his attack by commenting on her appearance, calling her an “aggressive Amazonian female, who personifies opportunism at its worst.”³¹ Smith went on to say:

Her manipulation of the radio and the newspaper column proved to be the creation of a new art. It was not new for a woman to be money hungry or publicity conscious. It was new for the wife of the President of the United States to use the influence of her high position for financial purposes. No one was interested in what Eleanor Roosevelt said because

²⁷ Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough: Exploiting the Office," *The Washington Post*, 29 October 1940.

²⁸ Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough: Danger of Blanket Commitments," *The Washington Post*, 10 January 1942.

²⁹ Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough: Reply to Guildsman," *The Washington Post*, 17 August 1940.

³⁰ Glen Jeansonne, "Gerald L.K. Smith," In *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, edited by Robert S. McElvaine (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004).

³¹ Gerald L.K. Smith, *Too Much and Too Many Roosevelts* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Nationalist Crusade, 1950), 3.

she was Eleanor Roosevelt... The newspapers which published her columns knew that large numbers of people would read it merely because she was the wife of the President.³²

Smith argued that she purely gained recognition due to her being First Lady. Her power was threatening to him as traditional First Ladies do not exhibit such political might. He devalued her opinions by framing them in a negative light and taking her power away, arguing it came from her husband and the position he gave her.

Mrs. Roosevelt faced criticism due to her concerted effort to cross the boundaries of traditional female power. Some men saw a powerful woman like Eleanor Roosevelt as a threat. They fought to uphold the narrow-minded view of the role of First Lady. For some, she had pushed the boundary too far, crossing the line of the domestic sphere for women and the line of powers men had given to the First Lady. She had accumulated too much strength for one woman to have by herself and it was their job to disvalue it and take it from her. Her critics wanted to prove that women could not hold more than a domestic role in America. Potentially, they had a fear that women would become too powerful for them to control. Any criticisms were attempts to discredit her, diminishing her supporter's ability to trust her. Critics attempted to show that her power came solely from her husband, painting a picture of a traditional wife that could do nothing without her husband's power. Attacks about her appearance were meant to discourage her yet these baseless attempts did not phase her. She possessed too much strength to take trivial attacks to heart. In many instances, she even fought back and responded by either denying or proving them wrong with the real truth.³³ She used the media to show her status as a woman of character, especially in regard to directly

³² Ibid., 14.

³³ R.J. Browne, "Critics Answered by Mrs. Roosevelt," *The New York Times*, Jan 16, 1933.

speaking with female journalists who were more likely to be in favor of her views. Doris O'Donnell, a daughter of a close companion of Mrs. Roosevelt said, "She enlisted them in her causes. She had an extraordinary creative capacity to see how people could best use their talents. These women had fought their way to the top in their profession against great odds...But they responded to Mrs. Roosevelt's vitality, sincerity, strength of character and her real interest in them."³⁴ She had a special way of drawing them in and captivating the media. Had the female lead media not been in her favor, Mrs. Roosevelt would not have had the power to fight off such attacks. She needed the female media to connect her to the public and spread her ideas of an equal society that she strove to create.

Because of Mrs. Roosevelt, the President and First Lady were no longer distant individuals that did not interact with the American people. The public loved her and believed in her causes because she cared about the public and the issues they faced. When referencing her great work, journalists noted, "It took courage, but that's the quality which seems to most accurately describe Mrs. Roosevelt—the courage of her convictions. Because of her apparent sincerity and her ability to do what she preaches; she has gone across with the American people. Whatever your politics, it's almost like saying you don't believe in good government to say you don't believe in Mrs. Roosevelt."³⁵ She changed the way people perceived the role of the First Lady. She could be political, but also a devoted wife and mother. She could push for political change, even participating in the United Nations and writing the Declaration of Human Rights.³⁶ She was emotionally honest and

³⁴ Doris O'Donnell, quoted in Abigail Q. McCarthy, "ER as First Lady." In *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, edited by Joan Hoff and Marjorie Lightman, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 218.

³⁵ "Eleanor Roosevelt: Abiding by No Written Rules, She Has Won a Place..." *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1939.

³⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," in *What I Hope to Leave Behind: The Essential Essays of Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. Allida M. Black (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, 1995), 531.

let her opinions be known regarding issues she truly cared about. Despite all of these amazing traits, in addition, she was humble. Lucy Greenbaum wrote, “Asked for what single accomplishment of her own she would best like to be remembered, she answers: ‘There is no accomplishment of mine that I think could possibly be important enough to be recorded, and I have no desire to be remembered except by the few people whom I love.’”³⁷ In Mrs. Roosevelt’s opinion, none of her acts were revolutionary because they should have been normal. She genuinely believed everyone should care for each other and fight for equality, which shouldn’t be a revolutionary ideal.

Mrs. Roosevelt set a precedent in the way she presented herself first and foremost as a loving wife and secondly, as a political power, proving her traditionalist male critics wrong. She made herself non-threatening to the traditional role of a woman, yet she put a new twist on the idea of women in power, arguing for a partnership of equality between men and women. She became a figurehead for women, giving them a model for exercising their political power like any other American citizen deserved to do. After Mrs. Roosevelt’s time in the White House, subsequent First Ladies were presented with a choice. Maurine Hoffman Beasley writes, “Eleanor left an indelible impression on her successors...For years presidential spouses have been described as either activists in Eleanor Roosevelt mold or traditionalists who do not follow her example. Mrs. Roosevelt widened the concept of the First Lady from being a minor player to a key supporting actress in the drama of the presidency itself.”³⁸ However, the change did not become apparent immediately. Bess Truman, the First Lady directly succeeding Mrs. Roosevelt did not attempt to make her own mark, staying within traditional barriers of what it means to be

³⁷ Lucy Greenbaum, “The Opinions of Eleanor Roosevelt,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1946.

³⁸ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2010), 3.

First Lady.³⁹ Conversely, Rosalynn Carter made a concerted effort to form a strong political partnership with her husband.⁴⁰ Hillary Clinton avidly spoke out on many different issues and topics and faced her own amount of backlash. Since the late twentieth century, it has become traditional for a First Lady to have her own initiative that she outwardly supported. Some were more successful and outspoken than others. However, as more First Ladies made their way through the White House, they became more likely to flex their political muscles as Mrs. Roosevelt had first done. Mrs. Roosevelt set the stage for the political path of the American First Lady and progressively First Ladies have become more politically active because of her work.

³⁹ Abigail Q. McCarthy, "ER as First Lady." In *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, edited by Joan Hoff and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 220.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 221.