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An Impartial Driver: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945-1948)

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An Impartial Driver:
Eleanor Roosevelt and the Drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945-1948)

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“The world of the future is in our making. Tomorrow is now.” - Eleanor Roosevelt



THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF Human Rights

WHEREAS recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

WHEREAS disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

WHEREAS it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

WHEREAS it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations among nations,

WHEREAS the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have

determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

WHEREAS Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

WHEREAS a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realisation of this pledge,

NOW THEREFORE THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PROCLAIMS this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

ARTICLE 1 — All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

ARTICLE 2 — 1. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
2. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether this territory be an independent, trust or Non-Self-Governing territory, or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

ARTICLE 3 — Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.

ARTICLE 4 — No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

ARTICLE 5 — No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

ARTICLE 6 — Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

ARTICLE 7 — All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

ARTICLE 8 — Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

ARTICLE 9 — No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

ARTICLE 10 — Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

ARTICLE 11 — 1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

ARTICLE 12 — No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

ARTICLE 13 — 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

ARTICLE 14 — 1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

ARTICLE 15 — 1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

ARTICLE 16 — 1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

ARTICLE 17 — 1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

ARTICLE 18 — Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

ARTICLE 19 — Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

ARTICLE 20 — 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

ARTICLE 21 — 1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

ARTICLE 22 — Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realisation, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

ARTICLE 23 — 1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration

insuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

ARTICLE 24 — Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

ARTICLE 25 — Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

ARTICLE 26 — 1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

ARTICLE 27 — 1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

ARTICLE 28 — 1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

ARTICLE 29 — 1. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.
2. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

ARTICLE 30 — Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

UNITED NATIONS

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at its 18th meeting, held in Paris on 10 December, 1948.
Issued by the U.N. Department of Public Information.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an international document that was adopted by the United Nations (UN) on December 10, 1948 in Paris, France that sought to outline the basic human rights and freedoms of individuals around the world. The UDHR was drafted by a number of representatives from many different cultural, political, and ideological backgrounds. It is the culmination of many hours of argument and debate. It was a monumental task that the drafting committee set out to achieve, especially when one considers the post-World War II and pre-Cold War political climate in which it was written. Yet, the UDHR was completed in less than two years, and was adopted with no countries dissenting, and a mere eight abstaining from voting.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the unanimously elected Chairperson of the UDHR drafting committee, was integral to the drafting process. As the Chairperson, Roosevelt did not actually write any of the document; rather, she kept the drafters on task and on the tight schedule that was needed in order for the document to be written in such a short amount of time. Eleanor's gender acted as a hindrance to her self-confidence and public persona, as she had to work twice as hard as the men she was overseeing just to gain their respect. Roosevelt had to prove that she was qualified to be there and deserved to be taken seriously, and she did just that. Who else would be able to unite the Soviet Union and the West in the writing of such a monumental and groundbreaking document?

This project seeks to prove why Eleanor Roosevelt was integral to the drafting of the UDHR. It begins by dissecting Roosevelt's years as First Lady and the things she was able to accomplish in her reimagining of the role. The project moves to her serving as a UN

representative, focusing on her preparation for the UN General Assembly meeting in January of 1946. From there, the project turns to Roosevelt's work on Committee Three, which proved she was more than capable of being the Chair of the UDHR drafting committee. The third chapter focuses on the actual drafting process of the UDHR, outlining Roosevelt's concrete influences on the document. The Epilogue explores the varying levels of success the UDHR has had in the years since it was written, and offers hope for the future of both the UN and the UDHR.

* * *

Chapter One opens with the phone call between Harry Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt in which he asks her to serve as a US representative at the UN. She immediately scoffs at the prospect because she fears she is unqualified. I use the phone call as a way to go back in time and look at her role as First Lady. Roosevelt reimagined the role of First Lady in a number of ways, specifically through her "My Day" column and her relationship with the press. She held women-only press conferences so that newspapers would feel obligated to keep women on their staff. All of her work as First Lady prepared her to be a UN representative, and despite her lack of confidence, she was more than qualified. While serving as First Lady, Eleanor did not feel free to use her voice politically, but after FDR died, she thought she would live a more private life free to express her opinions, no longer being restricted by the role of First Lady. She was wrong – her role as a UN representative and Chair of the UDHR drafting committee would put her in the public eye and she would be forced to once again represent the United States' views more than her own. When she eventually agreed to serve as a UN representative, she was almost unanimously approved by the Senate, but had she known she would need Senate approval she claims she would have said no because she thought she would not be approved. She lacked so

much confidence in herself and her political abilities, likely because she was a politically active woman in the 1940s. Roosevelt was a trail blazer even if she did not intend to be, so the spotlight was often on her.

The second chapter of my project seeks to show Eleanor's overpreparation for the UNGA meeting in January 1946. I argue that she was dealing with less than ideal circumstances while trying to prepare for the meeting, as the people who were with her did not care to keep her informed and made decisions without her, constantly keeping her out of the loop. Despite this, Eleanor prepared extensively and educated herself on the matters at hand and proved that she was ready to be a UN representative. Onboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, she prepared endlessly as she still feared she was not qualified to be a UN representative, and she knew the stakes were higher for her as the only woman in the US delegation. I then give an overview of the men from the State Department who accompanied Roosevelt on this trip and the other members of the delegation, some of whom Mrs. Roosevelt did not get along with. On the way to London, it was decided that Eleanor would serve on Committee Three: the social, humanitarian, and cultural committee. That decision was made without Eleanor being present, and it was evident that the men she was with thought it the least important of the committees. I attempt to prove that her role on Committee Three was integral to her being chosen as the Chairperson of the drafting committee in Chapter 3.

In the third chapter, I move to the drafting process of the UDHR. I open with Roosevelt's work on Committee Three and give some examples of how she rose to the occasion of that role, specifically when going against her Soviet counterpart. The third chapter seeks to describe the drafting process in detail by explaining who was involved from what countries, how many times

they met, and what really went into drafting this document. Specifically, I discuss what Roosevelt was able to accomplish as Chair of the drafting committee because she played a major role in the drafting process, but not as a writer. Her impact is felt in the style of the document and in the emphasis being placed on the rights of the individual. Roosevelt played the unique role of keeping the other drafters on track and limiting the endless debates between them, which was necessary for the document to be finished in the short amount of time that it was. I discuss some of the specific language of the document, especially when Roosevelt had opinions on the wording.

In the Epilogue, I consider the UDHR and its influence. I recognize that my views have changed over the course of my time working with this material and question why that might have been. I start by discussing the ways in which the document has been used by countries, specifically thinking about countries who implemented the language of the document into their constitutions. I then turn to the ways in which human rights language was used to assert the right to self-determination. From there, I think about the pros and cons of the UDHR being a legally binding document and whether or not that could have been successful. Then, I discuss the UN as an organization and the ways in which it is flawed at its core. Finally, I offer a piece of hope for the future, as I am not willing to give up on Eleanor's dreams of peace just yet.

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

Chapter 1: The Phone Call

In early December 1945, President Harry S. Truman phoned Eleanor Roosevelt, the recent widow and former First Lady, to ask her if she would serve as one of the five American delegates to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in January of 1946 in London. Her immediate reaction was to turn down the offer as she felt she was not qualified. It took her son Franklin Jr., and her friend Malvina Thompson, known as Tommy, who were in the room with her to remind her that she was indeed qualified for the appointment. In recounting the phone call, Allida Black writes,

Returning to the lunch table, [Franklin Jr.] pressed his mother to reconsider, and Tommy Thompson seconded his argument. Roosevelt later recalled that her immediate reaction was: ‘Oh, no! It would be impossible ... How could I be a delegate to help organize the United Nations when I have no background or experience in international meetings.’ Miss Thompson urged me not to decline without giving the idea careful thought.¹

In another recounting of the event, Joseph Lash writes that President Truman refused to be put off, according to Eleanor, and he insisted that she accept.² Mrs. Roosevelt reluctantly agreed to the appointment in what would turn out to be her most influential and significant political role. But why exactly did she initially feel that she was unqualified? She had reimagined the role of First Lady and was incredibly active in so many ways, yet the overwhelming pressure of being a woman in the political sphere made her question her preparedness for being a UN representative.

* * *

¹ Roosevelt and Black, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*.

² Lash, *Eleanor*.

Eleanor Roosevelt became interested in politics well before her time as First Lady. She always rejected the traditional role that wives of politicians were expected to carry out and felt that women could and should contribute to political discourse and policy. She, in fact, did just that. In an article titled “Eleanor Roosevelt: A crusading spirit to move human rights forward,” Anya Luscombe writes, “Eleanor hated the social duties that were expected of her as a politician’s wife... When in 1921 FDR contracted polio, Eleanor took it upon herself to keep the Roosevelt name at the forefront of the political scene. She became the Democratic Women’s Committee vice-president and finance chairman, and edited the Women’s Democratic News.”³ Roosevelt has written that she became politically active to keep the Roosevelt name alive in a sense, during the time of her husband’s illness. However, one cannot dismiss the fact that she likely did it for herself as well. Her passions shone through, and she truly was a natural leader. Perhaps she claimed her political activity was for her husband’s benefit so that her motivations would not be interrogated, as it does not take much imagination to deduce how most people during this time period would react to a politically active woman claiming ambition as her primary motivation.⁴

As First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt reimagined the role in a number of important ways. Prior to her, first ladies were mainly concerned with what they were wearing, how the White House was decorated, and being appealing accessories to hang on the arms of their husbands. Roosevelt was not interested in her looks or the color of the curtains and was even less interested in keeping quiet. Allida Black writes about Roosevelt’s entrance to the White House and to the role of First Lady,

³ Luscombe, “Eleanor Roosevelt.”

⁴ Roosevelt, “Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do.”

Eleanor Roosevelt entered the First Hundred Days of her husband's administration with no clearly defined responsibility. Her offers to sort FDR's mail and to act as his 'listening post' had been rejected summarily...And even though ER started to pay more attention to her wardrobe, society columnists were shocked that her clothes were so 'simple' and 'unchic.' Others lamented that 'she had no pride in her physical appearance at all.'⁵

Clearly, when she first moved into the White House and assumed the role of First Lady, the media and critics did not know how to react to her apparent dismissal of the First Lady norms. Eleanor did not know where she would fit into the White House either, but she eventually found her way.

There is an exhaustive list of accomplishments Roosevelt achieved while she was in the White House, but her relationship with the press and her widely celebrated "My Day" column are especially noteworthy. There was little room for a politically active, outspoken woman in early 20th century America, so Mrs. Roosevelt had to make room for herself. Through her "My Day" column, she was able to write about her critiques of her husband's administration and her own thoughts about current events. The column was reprinted in 48 newspapers and with a combined circulation of 4.5 million,⁶ so people seemed to care about what she had to say. Interestingly, there was a Gallup Poll conducted in 1942 asking the public how they felt about Roosevelt as First Lady and as a public figure. The responses revealed a complete lack of the middle ground: people either loved her or hated her. No one felt neutral about Roosevelt's role in the White House. In a *New York Times* article about the poll, George Gallup writes "The criticism most frequently given was that 'she is too much in the public eye... she ought to stay at home, where a wife belongs.' With about equal frequency came approval of the fact that 'she has a

⁵ Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*.

⁶ Black.

personality of her own and doesn't allow herself just to sit at home and do nothing.'"⁷ One of the main reasons the public was critical of Mrs. Roosevelt, therefore, appears to be due to misogyny. Some people had no interest in what the First Lady was saying about policies and current events. On the other hand, her personality and opinions excited many other people. These same people were likely the ones who read her "My Day" column six days a week and kept up with her informed political and social views.

In the same article, Gallup touches on the specific reasons why people admired Mrs. Roosevelt, and many of the reasons further prove that she was qualified to be a UN representative. He writes,

An appreciable percentage of those who specifically approved something about her liked her 'greatest interest in current affairs and the fact that she is able to take a stand on almost any current problem' ... About as large a group as the preceding were those who said, 'She talks too much.' About half as great a percentage commended her 'ability and courage to speak out on what she believes, in spite of criticism.' A large percentage of those approving Mrs. Roosevelt on some specific count commended her 'social consciousness... her efforts on behalf of mankind... on behalf of the poor.'⁸

The public was able to recognize the remarkable aspects of Roosevelt's character, including her ability to speak her mind despite what others thought of her and her social consciousness. Both of those aspects of her personality were essential for her success and were further reasons she was prepared to be a UN representative. If it was so clear to at least half of the public polled that she had the ability to speak on political matters, and if her opinion was not only welcomed but

⁷ Gallup, "Mrs. Roosevelt Is Both Praised And Blamed for Her Activities; 2 in Every 5 Voters Disapprove, Gallup Poll Finds -- Nearly Half Favor Something She Has Done, the Study Adds (Published 1942)."

⁸ Gallup.

actively sought after, then why did she have so much self doubt? The fact that she felt she should not be politically active or speak her mind as First Lady explains the public aspects of her self doubts.

Along with her “My Day” column, Eleanor Roosevelt was an advocate for the press, and her relationship with White House reporters helped shape her role as First Lady. Allida Black writes about this relationship:

Just as ER helped advance their careers, reporters helped ER become more adept at fielding their questions and subtly inserting her opinions...Eleanor Roosevelt held her own press conference to announce that she would ‘get together’ with women reporters once a week...ER hoped that together they not only could discuss her duties as first lady but also explain ‘what goes on politically in the legislative national life’ and encourage women to become active in the New Deal programs in their community. ‘The idea,’ she said, ‘largely is to make an understanding between the White House and the general public.’⁹

It was through her reciprocal relationship with reporters that Eleanor Roosevelt found her voice and became more comfortable with sharing her political opinions. What was supposed to be a discussion about the social duties of Roosevelt as First Lady often became a discussion of real-life politics, such as New Deal programs mentioned and the ways they were implemented in various communities. It was a radical act for a woman in the 1930s to be telling other women to be politically active, especially being that she held such an influential role and a very public role that put her in the spotlight constantly.

⁹ Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*.

Besides helping her advance her own interests and opinions, Roosevelt's relationship with reporters also helped advance women's rights, minority rights, and human rights more broadly.

In the same article by Anya Luscombe mentioned above, she writes about this relationship:

In 1933 when ER became First Lady she decided to hold women-only Press conferences so that newspapers during the depression would have to keep at least one female political reporter on the books if they wanted to cover the First Lady. She pressured the administration to appoint women to key positions in government and vociferously reminded the administration to ensure women – and African/Americans – were not left out of the New Deal support programs.¹⁰

Eleanor used her platform as First Lady in a number of important ways, but the women-only press conferences were particularly clever and significant, as they provided newspapers with an incentive to hire and keep at least one woman political reporter on staff. Women were seldom taken seriously when it came to politics — or any public sphere — and Eleanor Roosevelt wanted to change that. Roosevelt's urging of her husband's administration to appoint women to government positions and guarantee that New Deal programs would include women and minorities was crucial to the progressive nature of FDR's administration.

* * *

Roosevelt's 12 years as First Lady helped her shape and refine her political opinions and interests and effectively prepared her to be a US representative at the United Nations. However, it should be noted that while serving as First Lady, Roosevelt did not feel free to use her voice. She rarely shied away from sharing her opinions, but she felt a particular weight and pressure when she disagreed with FDR's positions on controversial issues, such as Japanese Internment,¹¹ or

¹⁰ Luscombe, "Eleanor Roosevelt."

¹¹ Roosevelt, "My Day," December 16, 1941.

when she criticized the US more broadly. At the time she could not have known that the same pressures would be felt when she was a UN representative and she was told to not speak out against the US while holding the power she did. At the UN, this tension arose when she was tasked with speaking on Soviet issues and she was fed speeches that represented US views over her own. When FDR died of a stroke,¹² it was obviously devastating for Eleanor, but also a relief in some ways. As Joseph Lash writes, “One comment she put off the record, ‘For the first time in my life I can say just what I want. For your information it is wonderful to feel free.’”¹³ This comment is striking, as it makes one ponder what Roosevelt would have said and done if she was not pressured to hold her tongue because of her husband. In the same light, would she have had the opportunity to speak publicly and on such an important platform had it not been for FDR’s presidency and overall political fame? If FDR did not contract polio in 1921 and pass away in 1942,¹⁴ would she have been able to be politically independent and represent the United States at the United Nations? It is impossible to know the answers to these hypotheticals; regardless, one cannot deny what Eleanor Roosevelt was able to accomplish on her own.

In a “My Day” column a week after FDR’s death, Eleanor wrote about her plans post-first lady; being a UN representative, evidently, was not on her radar. She wanted to pursue a career in writing and lead a more private life for a change. In the April 19, 1945 column Mrs. Roosevelt wrote,

I have two jobs that I consider myself obligated to do and that I want to do. My daily column I have always looked upon as a job which I wanted to have considered on its merits. Because I was the wife of the President, certain restrictions were imposed upon

¹² “FDR Biography - FDR Presidential Library & Museum.”

¹³ Lash, *Eleanor*.

¹⁴ “FDR Biography - FDR Presidential Library & Museum.””

me. Now I am on my own, and I hope to write as a newspaper woman. I certainly should have background to bring to the job, and if I have not developed powers of observation and correct reporting in the past years, that will soon be discovered.¹⁵

While Roosevelt felt the air of independence after FDR's death, she wanted to use that to speak (or write) her mind when it came to social and political issues, and current events. Once she was no longer tied to the White House in an official way, Roosevelt felt free to criticize the Truman administration like she never quite could her husband's and she did so in their extensive correspondence.¹⁶

This shift from being First Lady to being her own professional person was crucial to Eleanor Roosevelt's path of becoming a UN representative and, ultimately, the Chairperson of the UN Human Rights Commission. Allida Black writes,

If ER the widow was the model of party fidelity, ER the journalist planned to be the paragon of the loyal opposition. Subtly tacked within a column designed to rebut rumors of her political aspirations, ER served notice to the Truman administration and her public that she would continue to speak out. Yet she would speak with a different voice, a freer 'My Day.'¹⁷

As mentioned, Roosevelt used her column to staunchly criticize the Truman administration, and was able to shape her daily column to reflect her true feelings. Speaking her mind is what made Eleanor so popular among the American public, and it was also the main cause for criticism of her when she was First Lady. There were rumors that Mrs. Roosevelt would be Truman's running mate, or that she would run for office herself, and she used her "My Day" column to squash those

¹⁵ Roosevelt, "My Day," December 22, 1945.

¹⁶ Roosevelt and Truman, *Eleanor and Harry*.

¹⁷ Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*.

rumors as well, making it seem even more so that she was blindsided by President Truman's request that she serve as a UN representative. Constantly rebutting rumors that she would run for office certainly could not have helped her self-confidence, which is likely part of the reason why she scoffed at Truman's request initially to serve such an important role.

Mrs. Roosevelt spent the time after her husband's death debunking and rebutting rumors about potentials for her to run for office, as mentioned above. Roosevelt opened her April 19, 1945 "My Day" column discussing the latest rumors one short week after her husband's passing. She wrote,

Yesterday I was interested to hear a number of such rumors. First, that I wanted to be a special delegate to the San Francisco Conference. I had to tell Congresswoman Norton that I could not possibly go, and beg her not to make a speech about it. Then, I heard a rumor that I was going to run for a Federal elective position and, finally, that I was a candidate for Secretary of Labor! I had to tell several people quite forcibly that nothing would induce me to run for public office or to accept an appointment to any office at the present time.¹⁸

Little did Eleanor know that a few short months later she would embark on what would be her most significant political venture. She was constantly putting herself down and making claims that she would not run for office or accept an appointment to any office, and for what reason? She wanted women to be politically active, but could not imagine herself in a leadership position. Events in December of 1945 would upend Eleanor's plans to live a private life after being first lady, and she would finally be doing the work she was destined to do.

¹⁸ Roosevelt, "My Day," April 19, 1945.

There is a laundry list of reasons for why Eleanor Roosevelt was qualified to serve as a UN representative, and ultimately be the Chair of the UN Human Rights Commission. One of the most important reasons, besides her qualifications and public recognition, is that she believed in the United Nations. When recounting the phone conversation between her and President Truman when he asked her to serve, she said “I believed the United Nations to be the one hope for a peaceful world. I knew that my husband had placed great importance on the establishment of this world organization.”¹⁹ Being that the United Nations was newly founded, and it was easy to be skeptical of its chances for success, it was incredibly significant that Roosevelt had faith in its place in the world. She claims that she was carrying on her husband’s legacy, but she was her own advocate for peace, and she believed in a strong global body to try and implement this vision. She likely hid behind her husband’s claims about believing in the UN because it was much easier to be a parrot of your husband as a woman in the 1940s and not making such claims for yourself. In her book titled *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism*, Lois Scharf writes about Roosevelt and peace:

As first lady, she addressed peace issues on her radio broadcasts, listed peace as a topic on which she was prepared to speak on her lecture tours, held receptions for delegates to peace organizations’ conferences, and lent her name to the prominent antiwar groups of the 1930s. She even urged toymakers to ‘turn their attention from tin soldiers ... and warlike toys.’²⁰

Clearly, Mrs. Roosevelt cared about peace. She constantly talked about peace and prioritized it when addressing the American public. She was preparing for a United Nations appointment well before the United Nations even existed and outside of her husband’s interest in peace.

¹⁹ Roosevelt and Boutros-Ghali, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*.

²⁰ Scharf, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

After the weighty phone call in December, 1945 in which Eleanor initially turned down Truman's appointment with claims that she was unqualified, she eventually agreed to serve as a UN representative at the UNGA meeting in London in January, 1946. In a letter following the phone call, Truman wrote to Eleanor about the momentous task the delegates would have:

You, as a representative of the United States will bear the grave responsibility of demonstrating the wholehearted support which this government is pledged to give to the United Nations Organization, to that end the organization can become the means of preserving the international peace and of creating conditions of mutual trust and economic and social well-being among all peoples of the world. I am confident that you will do your best to assist these purposes in the first meeting of the General Assembly.²¹

It is clear from this excerpt that President Truman thought very highly of Eleanor's abilities to be a UN representative, and more importantly to be a representative of the United States and his administration. Some have speculated that the reason he chose her to be a UN representative is because he thought it would make him look good for reelection since she was so popular among the American people. Whether or not this was true, he clearly knew that this position was important for the US and that it took a special person to fill that role, and that person was Eleanor Roosevelt. Her belief in world peace and the rights of marginalized people shone through in all of her work, so this position was made for her. Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman sent correspondence to each other for many years after FDR's death, and the letters are very telling of their relationship. Eleanor never shied away from criticizing the Truman administration's decisions regarding policy in her letters to the President. She was constantly sharing her thoughts

²¹ Roosevelt and Truman, *Eleanor and Harry*.

with him, and he responded in earnest, making it seem at least like he genuinely cared about what she had to say.

In recounting her acceptance of the appointment, Eleanor wrote about how she would have said no to Truman if she knew that the appointment would have to go through the Senate. She writes, “But I might not have done so if I had known at that time that President Truman could only nominate me as a delegate and that the nomination would have to be approved by the United States Senate, where certain senators would disapprove of me because of my attitude toward social problems and more especially youth problems.”²² She feared that the Senate would not approve the appointment, but she did not have to worry, as only one senator voted against her approval because he did not agree with her statements about African Americans.²³ Most men of the time, and today, would hardly think twice about a few people disapproving of them. In a “My Day” column on December 22, 1945, Roosevelt wrote about her UN appointment saying,

Now that I have been confirmed by the Senate, I can say how deeply honored I feel that President Truman has named me one of the delegates to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization. It is an honor, but also a very great responsibility. I know it has come to me largely because my husband laid the foundation for this Organization through which we all hope to build world peace.²⁴

Once it was official that Mrs. Roosevelt would be a US delegate to the United Nations, she began to feel more confident. She did not take the responsibility lightly, and in the next chapter, I will discuss the ways in which she prepared for the UNGA meeting. Yet even when she was confirmed by an overwhelming majority of the Senate, she still believed that the main reason she

²² Roosevelt, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Vol. 1*.

²³ Lash, *Eleanor*.

²⁴ Roosevelt, “My Day,” December 22, 1945.

was chosen was because her husband laid the groundwork for the United Nations. While FDR's vision for a peacebuilding organization was significant and should not be understated, not just any former first lady would be granted such a position. Her appointment to this position was not due to her being the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt; it was due to her being Eleanor Roosevelt. She cared so deeply about human rights and the rights of women, minorities, and children and her compassion shone through all of the work she did.

Eleanor Roosevelt was more than qualified to serve as a US representative to the United Nations. This chapter only scratches the surface of her endless list of accomplishments as First Lady. The way she engaged with current events in her "My Day" column and the way she cleverly ensured that newspapers would keep women political reporters on their staff through her women-only press conferences were testaments to her character and political savvy. Roosevelt was so deeply engaged in current events and she cared so deeply about the American people and the public recognized that, as was made clear by the Gallup Poll results. Her popularity was not unfounded and President Truman knew this when he chose her to be a UN representative. His appointment of Mrs. Roosevelt was a wise decision and one that she did not take lightly. She prepared extensively for the UNGA meeting she attended in London in January of 1946, and the next chapter will focus on her preparation and the team of State Department representatives who accompanied her.

“Have convictions. Be friendly. Stick to your beliefs as they stick to theirs. Work as hard as they do.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

Chapter 2: (Over) Preparation

On December 31, 1945 the *Queen Elizabeth* set sail to London. Aboard the ship were many prominent US delegates, including Eleanor Roosevelt. Preparation for the UNGA meeting was not something Mrs. Roosevelt took lightly. She prepared as much as she could, sending letters to colleagues, attending briefings aboard the ship, and reading everything she was given so she fully understood the United States' stances on certain issues. This was not a leisurely ride across the pond, to say the least. A major reason Roosevelt felt she needed to be as prepared as possible was because of her gender. She knew there was extra weight on her shoulders, being the only woman from the United States to be attending the meeting in London. She did not have the option to fail. As was discussed in the last chapter, Eleanor Roosevelt feared she was not qualified for the appointment, so her overpreparation was inevitable. She also knew that at least a few of her fellow delegates were not too pleased to be working with her, which only added to the pressure to pull her weight. Despite the less than ideal circumstances Roosevelt was dealt, including limited time to prepare and a team of people who were not too keen on keeping her informed, she prepared and educated herself as much as she could, ultimately proving she was indeed ready for the meeting in London.

In order to fully comprehend the circumstances that surrounded Eleanor's preparation, it is useful to acknowledge the men from the State Department who accompanied her on the *Queen Elizabeth*, as well as the other US delegates who rounded out the delegation. Joseph Lash writes about the group: "It consisted of five representatives – Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, Edward R. Stettinius Jr., who was the US representative on the Security Council; Sen. Tom

Connally (D - Texas), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Sen. Arthur H. Vandenberg (R - Michigan), ranking Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Mrs. Roosevelt.”²⁵ The sentiment among the four men was that Roosevelt was not qualified to be there. She knew they felt this way, and such is why she prepared as much as she could, including attending the daily briefings and reading everything that was left in her cabin on the ship, even if it was not always helpful. Eleanor’s relationship with the other delegates was not entirely friendly. In her book titled *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady of American Liberalism*, Lois Scharf writes about this relationship:

Several colleagues did not feel wonderful about [Mrs. Roosevelt’s] presence among them... The ranking Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was Arthur Vandenberg, as stalwart an isolationist as the Midwest had produced until he became a convert to internationalism in 1940. Neither he nor an alternate delegate, John Foster Dulles, who had been Thomas Dewey’s foreign affairs adviser during the 1944 presidential campaign, had much tolerance or respect for their female Democratic associate.²⁶

The lack of respect for Eleanor Roosevelt from most of the other delegates may have come from their political differences, as they were Republicans and she was a Democrat, but it was more likely derived from the fact that she was an opinionated woman who often refused to hold her tongue.

Roosevelt did not shy away from how she felt about the men who accompanied her from the State Department and the other US delegates. In a letter to Elinor Morgenthau (one of Eleanor’s closest friends), she wrote of the other delegates: “Senator Arthur Vandenberg ‘is smart

²⁵ Lash, *Eleanor*.

²⁶ Scharf, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

& hard to get along with and does not say what he feels. Byrnes is much too small for the job & ... can never give any inspiration ... Tom Connally is nicer than I thought but he has no real sensitivity ... J. Foster Dulles I like not at all.”²⁷ While Eleanor was an eternal optimist, she noted that most of these men, especially Vandenberg, were quite pessimistic. It does not take much thought to conclude that this group of men was not too fun to work with. Roosevelt went on to discuss the State Department staff whom she was more impressed with. These men included Alger Hiss, Dr. Ralph Bunche, Adlai Stevenson, Ben Cohen, and Durward Sandifer. She consulted with and spoke to these men much more than the other delegates, and she claimed they had influence and a sense of responsibility that the others lacked. Mrs. Roosevelt hoped that what she said to these men would carry more weight and get back to President Truman and others in Washington.²⁸

It was clear from the beginning that Eleanor was different from the other representatives. When arriving at the *Queen Elizabeth*, most of the other representatives had grand entrances in limos and fancy cars with people carrying their bags aboard for them. Mrs. Roosevelt arrived in a taxi, carrying her own luggage and boarding alone.²⁹ While she was physically carrying her luggage, she was also carrying the weight that President Truman put on her as a US representative. In a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt about her appointment on December 21, 1945, Truman wrote,

You, as a representative of the United States will bear the grave responsibility of demonstrating the wholehearted support which this government is pledged to give to the United Nations Organization, to that end the organization can become the means of

²⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

²⁸ Cook.

²⁹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*.

preserving the international peace and of creating conditions of mutual trust and economic and social well-being among all peoples of the world. I am confident that you will do your best to assist these purposes in the first meeting of the General Assembly.³⁰

The weight that was put on Mrs. Roosevelt's shoulders, as well as the other delegates, was not taken lightly by her. She knew how much her husband, Franklin Roosevelt, believed in a United Nations Organization, and she would do what she could to uphold that belief and see both of their visions through.

As part of her preparation for the meeting, Mrs. Roosevelt consulted friends and colleagues from various organizations to gather their expertise on UN decisions that had already been made and what issues they wanted Eleanor to bring to the meeting and organization. Some of the people who wrote to Eleanor with their opinions and expertise included Archibald MacLeish, a US writer, and Walter White, an NAACP leader. At the end of his letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, MacLeish wrote, "May I say in closing what I know you realize – that millions of your fellow citizens are profoundly thankful to Almighty God that you are a member of the Delegation."³¹ In White's letter, he consulted with other NAACP leaders, specifically W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, and compiled a list of nine issues that they hoped Mrs. Roosevelt would bring to the attention of the other delegates at the UNGA. These were no small issues that they wanted raised. They included a world-wide campaign to abolish the entire colonial system, democracy for China, and the withdrawal of recognition of Franco's Spain.³² Eleanor was unique in that she truly wanted to bring issues that people other than herself were

³⁰ Roosevelt and Truman, *Eleanor and Harry*.

³¹ Roosevelt, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Vol. 1*.

³² Roosevelt.

facing to the forefront of the United Nations, and she was not there solely for her own political gain, making her a rare example of a person with power listening to the people. She made it clear that she had no intentions to run for political office, which is why she may have been so selfless in her position. Roosevelt's belief in the UN shone through in the intense way she prepared for the meeting in one short week. As soon as she found out she was confirmed by the Senate, she wrote to these people, and their swift responses made it seem, at the very least, that Eleanor would take their requests seriously.

Eleanor had a clear vision for what she wanted to accomplish as a delegate. In a press conference aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, she was asked what her particular interests were as a delegate. Roosevelt responded:

I have one main interest – that we do set up an organization that can function. I think that is the main interest of everybody on the Delegation – that we set up the machinery and begin to go to work; because no one is going to set up a perfect – 51 nations are not going to set up a final and perfect organization but are going to set up something which can start to give us a chance to build for peace. I think that is the main objective of everybody on our Delegation. Naturally by having the kind of background I have, my interest is in the things that contribute – which are the causes of war...³³

Although unable to foresee the future, it does make sense that Mrs. Roosevelt would later be chosen to be the Chairperson of the drafting committee for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She was prepared to hit the ground running when it came to getting things done, which has certainly not always been the case for an organization like the UN. As part of her preparation on the ship, she felt she needed to understand the technicalities of the Assembly meeting. Joseph

³³ Roosevelt.

Lash writes of her on-board preparation: “As the delegation disembarked at Southampton, James Reston cabled the *New York Times* that Mrs. Roosevelt had impressed her colleagues ‘by her industry in studying the technical details’ of the approaching Assembly... not only had she attended all delegation briefings but she had sat in with the reporters during their interviews with State Department officials.”³⁴ For Mrs. Roosevelt, at least, this was not a leisurely nor relaxing boat ride. She was taking in as much information as possible, and would not be seen as underprepared next to her male delegates.

Eleanor acknowledged that she needed to be as prepared as possible in her letters to colleagues, as well as in her “My Day” column. She knew that it would be advantageous to her to take in as much information as she could in the short time she had to prepare, so she did. In her “My Day” column on December 31, 1945 while on board the *Queen Elizabeth*, Roosevelt wrote,

Ordinarily, we would be saying to ourselves, ‘But at least, when I get on board, I can sleep for 48 hours.’ This time, none of us on this trip will be able to say anything of the kind. Our time will not be our own. I am told we will be ‘briefed,’ whatever that may mean, during the trip. I am thankful beyond words, however, for this ‘briefing,’ since I need it in the worst possible way. I know that I will not only listen avidly to everyone who has information to impart, but if any reading is suggested I shall be searching around for the books recommended and trying to find spare moments in which I can sit in peace and quiet and absorb their contents.³⁵

Being that Eleanor Roosevelt was the only woman in the US delegation, and one of few women asked to be a part of the UN, she felt that she had to represent all women, which contributed to her preparation for the meeting. In a “My Day” column on December 22, 1945

³⁴ Lash, *Eleanor*.

³⁵ Roosevelt, “My Day,” December 31, 1945.

right after being confirmed by the Senate to be a US representative, she reflected on the appointment: “Being the only woman delegate from this country, I feel a great responsibility, also, to the women of my own country. In other lands women have gone with their men into the fighting forces. Here we have more nearly followed the traditional pattern of working and waiting at home.”³⁶ This was an interesting angle from Mrs. Roosevelt, as she was acknowledging the lack of gender equity in the US, while recognizing that some other countries were more advanced than the US. Using fighting in the military as the example for how other countries were more advanced was odd. It almost seemed as if she were longing for women to be able to be in the military and fight in wars, but this was not the solution one would expect from her, as she was such a staunch advocate for peace who actively spoke out against war. This recognition of inequity in the US and the responsibility she held as a woman delegate made her appointment all the more important, in her eyes and the eyes of the United States.

Mrs. Roosevelt’s serious approach to the UN appointment and being prepared for the meeting did not go unnoticed by everyone. As David Michaelis puts it,

Ralph Bunche, the delegation and staff’s only African American, concluded that ER, its only woman, was the one member of the contingent trying to grasp the fine points of each position so that she could hold herself accountable to US policy... Neither would rest until she or he carried twice the load of their white male counterparts. ‘I knew if I failed to be a useful member,’ reckoned Eleanor, ‘it would not be considered merely that I as an individual had failed, but that all women had failed, and there would be little chance for others to serve in the near future.’³⁷

³⁶ Roosevelt, “My Day,” April 19, 1945.

³⁷ Michaelis, *Eleanor*.

Roosevelt had a confidant in Bunche, both knowing that they had to pull more weight than the other members of the US delegation and staff because of their respective race and gender. They were both entering territory that was almost exclusively reserved for white men. While Eleanor may not have necessarily approached the UN position with exclusively feminist politics, as she was representing larger US views, she was well aware of the responsibility she carried being a woman in such an important position with all eyes on her.

Onboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, Eleanor was not aware what committee she would be on when the delegation arrived in London, but she assumed she would be part of the discussion about placement. In the third volume of her three-volume biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Blanche Wiesen Cook discusses how Roosevelt found out about her committee. She writes,

Much alone aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, she was surprised during one afternoon walk to be stopped by Senator Vandenberg, who said in his rather deep voice, ‘we would like to know if you would serve on Committee 3,’ the social, humanitarian, and cultural committee. ER wondered why that decision was made without her but assumed that the men, who clearly resented her presence, had decided it was an appropriate place for a woman, and not especially important. But on the voyage out she remembered that she enjoyed a good fight, and that she was prepared to compete.³⁸

The decision to put Eleanor on Committee Three was clearly deliberate, as it was assumed that she could do the least amount of “damage” there. The other US delegates, who were all men, felt that social, humanitarian, and cultural causes were not as important as the other committees that focused on economic and financial issues, or disarmament and security. Committee Three felt like the safe place to stick the opinionated former first lady. While it is obvious in retrospect —

³⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

and to any Human Rights major — that Committee Three was just as important as the other committees, this move by Vandenberg was malicious and meant to make Eleanor feel as if she did not belong. Little did the other delegates know that her appointment to serve on Committee Three would lead to her being the Chair of the UDHR drafting committee and have a lasting legacy in the UN.

It was clear to Mrs. Roosevelt that she would not be left to her own devices while serving as a US representative. She would be solely representing the United States, as President Truman made clear in a letter to her about her appointment on December 21, 1945. He wrote, “In so far as matters may arise which are not covered by the report of the preparatory commission, I shall transmit through the senior representatives of the United States. I have instructed the senior representative to act as the principal spokesman for the United States in the General Assembly.”³⁹ In some of Mrs. Roosevelt’s more questionable compromises/decisions, it was clear she was not representing her own views. Yet, she persisted and turned heads whenever she spoke because of her passion for peace and a more just world, and also because she consistently delivered speeches without notes. She would rise to the occasion, despite the restraints put on her by being a representative of an entire country, and not being free to express her views.

Eleanor’s preparation for the UNGA meeting paid off in a number of ways. Despite being on Committee Three, she gained support from representatives on both sides of the aisle. As Cook puts it,

She would lend considerable dash to the bipartisan and rather conservative first UN team... By appointing ER to the US delegation to the UN, President Truman gave her the chance to fight for her vision of the future from an official position of leadership for over

³⁹ Roosevelt and Truman, *Eleanor and Harry*.

six years. She considered her appointment a great victory for women and a great opportunity. She would lobby and cajole, compromise and go to battle. She would be an earnest diplomat who frequently succeeded. When she lost, she would return fighting. Convinced that pessimism was politically incorrect, she would never give up.⁴⁰

The next chapter will take a deeper look at what exactly Mrs. Roosevelt was able to accomplish while serving as a UN representative. Specifically, the focus will be on her role in Committee Three as well as being the Chair of the UDHR drafting committee and the unique power and platform that afforded her.

Preparing for the UNGA meeting in January of 1946 was no small feat for Mrs. Roosevelt. Being that she only found out she would officially be a representative 10 days prior to setting sail on the *Queen Elizabeth*, Eleanor had to consult with as many people as she could and read as much as possible in order to be prepared. As was discussed, she wrote letters to colleagues, sat in on briefings, and read all that was put in front of her. Despite the other delegates not taking too kindly to having a woman as their fellow delegate, she rose above that and turned heads from both sides of the aisle. Eleanor Roosevelt knew she could not fail, for her failure would be seen as a failure for all women. So, she continued to learn and educate herself on foreign affairs and the United Nations Organization, and eventually landed the role of Chair of the drafting committee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

⁴⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*.

“It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

Chapter 3: Drafting the Declaration

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was ratified on December 10, 1948. Although the drafting process happened in a short amount of time, there were endless hours of hard work dedicated to making it a cohesive and fair document. How did we get there? There were many key players in the drafting process, but Eleanor Roosevelt's role as the Chairperson was undeniably crucial. While she did not actually contribute to the writing of the declaration, she kept the other members of the committee on task and on a schedule that often meant working late into the night, or through the night into the early morning hours. Someone needed to keep these men from squabbling about issues that were not vital to the document, and it was Mrs. Roosevelt who was able to accomplish this task. It is important to look at how Roosevelt was picked as Chair of the UDHR drafting committee, and that was largely due to her demeanor and also her work on Committee Three. Eleanor's role as Chair of the UDHR drafting committee was integral to the document being finished in such a short amount of time, and having such accessible language at the root of it. Her influence is felt throughout the entirety of the document, from the style of the document carrying moral weight but no legal weight, to the accessible language and, perhaps most importantly, to the fact that the document was completed at all.

When she arrived in London in January 1946 for the UNGA meeting, Roosevelt was appointed to serve on Committee Three: the Humanitarian, Social, and Cultural Affairs committee. Mrs. Roosevelt was chosen for that committee largely because she was the only woman on the US delegation and that committee was seen as less important than the others, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. However, Roosevelt's work on this committee shocked

many of her peers who then began to take her seriously as a delegate. The circumstances were less than ideal for Roosevelt, as she was barely briefed about what she was supposed to do, and further complicating the situation was that the US position on the issue was left unclear.

Committee Three was tasked with what would become the most heated topic of the UNGA meeting: refugees and displaced peoples. Being that the UNGA meeting was in January of 1946, only a few months after the end of World War II, tensions were high when it came to displaced persons. Post-war reconstruction and political crises were on the mind of most governments, and the opinions varied greatly on the specific issues of Committee Three. Eleanor felt alone when it came to how to go about her work on the Committee, but she quickly became acquainted with the US delegation's principal adviser, Durward V. Sandifer. As David Michaelis puts it in his book titled *Eleanor*, "Before the end of the London session, Eleanor would adopt 'Sandy' as her confidential adviser and primary ally..."⁴¹ Luckily she had a confidant in him, because the US objectives and guidelines on Committee Three were not clear, and Roosevelt was essentially left to her own devices to decide the US position.

The work done on Committee Three would be what effectively put Mrs. Roosevelt on the map for being a successful delegate and UN representative, despite the lack of a US position. Eleanor had no use for President Truman's new secretary of state, James Byrnes. Michaelis writes,

Eleanor greeted his arrival with grave concern: 'Secretary Byrnes seems to me to be afraid to decide on what he thinks is right and stand on it.' The US contingent, after all, was in a position to lead: 'But we don't. We shift to conciliate and trail either Great Britain or Russia.' Simply put: 'Secretary Byrnes is afraid of his own delegation.'⁴²

⁴¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*.

⁴² Michaelis.

Due to Byrne's indecisiveness, Roosevelt and Sandifer were left to decide how to approach the issue at hand in Committee Three. Upon learning that displaced political dissidents were likely to be killed if they were to return home – many were deemed war criminals by their respective countries – Eleanor immediately took her position. This would become the first of many heated debates between the US and the Soviets, and particularly between US delegate Eleanor Roosevelt and Soviet delegate Andrei Vishinsky. The Soviet view was that displaced people must return home, even if it means they will be killed because those are the consequences and they are traitors. Eleanor, backed by Sandifer, believed that refugees were not traitors or criminals and must be guaranteed political sanctuary wherever they reside. Michaelis writes of this heated debate,

Clear and forceful in her opposition, Eleanor punched back hard against the proposed restrictions... 'The restrictions are restrictive to human rights and human freedoms.'... She argued that the proposal before the assembly provided adequately for the return of war criminals. Refugees, however, were not criminals. Many remained in the camps temporarily because they disagreed with their home governments. They must be allowed to live where they liked. 'Are we so weak in the United Nations,' she asked, 'that we should forbid human beings to say what they see and hear, what they think and believe? They may even say things against the United States, but I still think it's their right to say them.'⁴³

Roosevelt was clear in her convictions and never had to repeat herself. Her position, which would ultimately become the US position, was both logical and humane. She was not afraid of the other representatives and committee members, and she was not afraid to criticize the UN. Mrs.

⁴³ Michaelis.

Roosevelt was one of the few people who would stand up to Vishinsky and his views and later, other stubborn and difficult representatives in the drafting committee.

Eleanor Roosevelt had no issue backing her position in Committee Three and facing Vishinsky head-on. The debate they had concerning displaced persons was a major turning point in Roosevelt being taken seriously as a delegate. Brian Urquhart, a member of the British diplomatic staff that helped in establishing the UN, wrote an article titled “Mrs. Roosevelt’s Revolution” about her work in the UN. He wrote about the argument between Roosevelt and Vishinsky, as he was present:

I remember vividly her later encounters with Andrei Vishinsky over the fate of European refugees from the war. Vishinsky, the vitriolic public prosecutor in the Soviet show trials of the 1930s, was a highly abusive and almost unstoppable orator. He had a shock of white hair and an unhealthy-looking pale complexion that turned bright red when he was angry or frustrated. ‘Mr. Vishinsky,’ Mrs. Roosevelt would say in the maternal tone of one correcting an errant child, ‘We here in the United Nations are trying to develop ideas which will be broader in outlook, which will consider first the rights of man, which will consider what makes man more free. Not governments, Mr. Vishinsky, but man.’ Vishinsky would turn beet red, but, for once, was at a loss for words.⁴⁴

Roosevelt was an intense orator, and one of the few that could leave someone as stubborn and politically opposed to her views as Vishinsky speechless. No one wanted to face him and challenge his views, including the other US delegates, so they sent the woman who they did not trust to do what they considered to be futile. This was just one of many tests that Roosevelt would pass as a competent and capable UN delegate. Although that anecdote focuses on the reaction of Vishinsky, Eleanor’s words were significant. She was focused on the rights of the

⁴⁴ Urquhart, “Mrs. Roosevelt’s Revolution.”

individual over that of the government, which is something that would stick with her and her positions for the entirety of the drafting process and will be discussed later in this chapter. She wanted individuals to know and be able to call upon their rights and not have to rely exclusively on their governments to grant them. An individual should have rights on the basis of being a human, and those rights should not be indicative of where they are from nor impeded on by the government of their home country. Hence, she was in favor of refugees and displaced people choosing where they would live. In the end, the General Assembly rejected the Soviet proposals, and they voted unanimously to further investigate the refugee problem, recommending that the Economic and Social Council establish a Special Committee for the issue of refugees.⁴⁵

* * *

The UN Human Rights Commission is where the UDHR drafting committee was born. It was clear to anyone who had worked with, or seen her work at the UN, that Eleanor Roosevelt would be the Chair of the UDHR drafting committee. In his book, *Human Rights & the United Nations: A Great Adventure*, John Humphrey, a delegate from Canada and principal writer of the UDHR, wrote “In August 1946, when I arrived at Hunter College, the most important person in the United Nations human rights program was already Eleanor Roosevelt. She had been the chairman of the so-called nuclear or preparatory Commission on Human Rights when it met in May; and it was generally expected that she would preside over the definitive commission.”⁴⁶ Humphrey thought very highly of Roosevelt, and his opinion was crucial as he was one of the key drafters of the document. It feels as if it would not take much for his opinion of her to be

⁴⁵ Sciboz, “Research Guides.”

⁴⁶ Humphrey, *Human Rights & the United Nations*.

jaded after she was essentially in charge of him for the entirety of the drafting process, yet he consistently spoke of her in the highest regard.

It is important to be aware of the countries that were represented in the UDHR drafting committee. In Johannes Morsink's book titled *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*, Morsink describes the drafting process and the countries involved in detail. In April and May of 1946, the Nuclear Committee chose which nations were to produce the document and serve on the Human Rights Commission. Some of the key drafters include Chairperson Eleanor Roosevelt from the United States, Vice-Chairperson Peng-chun Chang from China, Rapporteur Charles Habib Malik from Lebanon. William Hodgson was the representative from Australia, Hernán Santa Cruz from Chile, René Cassin from France, Alexander Bogomolov from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Charles Dukes from the United Kingdom, and John Humphrey from Canada. The other countries that were part of the HRC were Belgium, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), Egypt, India, Iran, Panama, Philippine Republic, Uruguay, and Yugoslavia.⁴⁷ The countries represented were from both the East and West, which would inevitably result in conflicts when drafting the declaration. Within the Human Rights Commission, there was a Nuclear Commission that consisted of eight members who were tasked with the actual writing of the UDHR.

Roosevelt had much to say about this drafting committee, and her opinion was not treated lightly. The Soviets were not pleased with the Human Rights Commission as it was, and they challenged it. Humphrey recounts this in his book saying,

But, as in many procedural debates, the underlying issue was strictly political, in this case, whether the Soviet Union was to have a share in the preliminary drafting of the

⁴⁷ Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

international bill of rights, an issue which was resolved on 24 March, when Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a letter to Sir Ramaswami saying that she intended to appoint a new drafting committee of eight members of the commission: Australia, Chile, China, France, Lebanon, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. Strictly speaking, she had no legal right to change the decision of the commission in a matter on which it had been explicit: but her solution was realistic and politically acceptable and was approved by the Council.⁴⁸

Not only was Roosevelt influential in the contents of the declaration, she was also essentially responsible for the members of the committee. In most cases, when someone does something beyond their reach in the position they hold, they are punished. In the case of Mrs. Roosevelt and her realistic and inclusive approach to the UDHR drafting process, however, this change to the drafting committee was accepted and proved to be successful.

The drafting committee met many times in the two years it took to write the document. The structure of the drafting of the UDHR was in a way that all UN member nations were able to have at least some say in it, and most did voice their opinions. The eight-member Nuclear Committee met 18 times in May 1946. The Commission with 18 members was thus created and met 81 times over the two year drafting process. After these meetings, Committee Three met a whopping 150 times. Finally, after a few more days of discussions, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on December 10, 1948.⁴⁹ It is safe to say there were quite a few meetings to draft this declaration, which makes sense considering the amount of people who had a say in the wording and content of the document, and the overall political environment in which it was being drafted. There were so many opinionated people with varying perspectives voicing their

⁴⁸ Humphrey, *Human Rights & the United Nations*.

⁴⁹ Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

concerns and the interests of their nations that it would have been impossible to draft without meeting so many times and having such intense arguments and debates to flesh out the wording of the articles.

Although it was not entirely surprising that Mrs. Roosevelt would be the Chair of the drafting committee, the unanimous election was significant. In an article titled “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Crusading Spirit to Move Human Rights Forward,” Anya Luscombe writes “On 27 January 1947 at Lake Success, New York, the members of the Human Rights Commission unanimously elected Eleanor Roosevelt chair. She warned she would ‘not only be an impartial Chairman, but perhaps at times a harsh driver.’”⁵⁰ She did prove to be both of these things, and without her ability to keep the intellectual and wordy men she was working with on track and focused, it is unclear if there would be a Declaration today. She set the tone for how the drafting process was going to go. The amount of time spent on each article in the drafting process was significant, and without an overseer capable of holding a room the way Roosevelt could, the process would have been longer and even more exhausting than it already was.

The style of the document was important, and Eleanor Roosevelt naturally had a great influence on that as well. In her book titled *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights*, Elizabeth Borgwardt writes,

ER was also the driving force behind the strategic decision to draft the Declaration of Human Rights as an Atlantic Charter-style document rather than as a detailed and ‘binding’ treaty. Ambassador Roosevelt, as well as the phalanx of State Department advisors assigned to her, was concerned that a detailed complex instrument would risk

⁵⁰ Luscombe, “Eleanor Roosevelt.”

ridicule or irrelevance for what would inevitably be its lack of enforcement powers (or for the inability of delegates to agree on anything at all).⁵¹

Roosevelt was a realist when it came to the style of the document. This may have been because she was representing the US and its position, and not entirely her own, as she was an eternal optimist who might have opted for a legally binding document to hold states accountable. It cannot be known for sure what her stance would have been if she were left to her own devices and speaking entirely for herself. It has been debated at length whether or not the document should have been legally binding. This, however, is often a larger criticism of the UN being upheld by morals and not legality. One might argue that had the drafters agreed upon the UDHR being legally binding, they would still be working on it today. It was hard enough to agree upon the language of the document they ended up with, as vague as it is, and it only carries moral weight, relying on people to do what's best for others. Imagine if the document were legally binding and there were actual consequences for countries who did not uphold the values of the document. Roosevelt wrote about the style of the document in a *Foreign Affairs* article titled, "The Promise of Human Rights." She writes, "We mapped out our work very carefully. The position of the United States had been that it would be impossible in these initial meetings to do more than write a Declaration. If the Declaration were accepted by the General Assembly the next autumn, it would carry moral weight, but it would not carry any legal weight."⁵² Roosevelt had hoped that the moral weight would be enough for the document to be effective.

⁵¹ Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*.

⁵² Roosevelt, "The Promise of Human Rights."

There were many aspects of the process of drafting the UDHR and the document itself that were touched by Eleanor Roosevelt's influence and opinion. Besides the overall style of the document, which was significant, she also felt very strongly about the language of the document. It was crucial that the document be accessible to the average person and not just men with college degrees who were involved in politics. She wanted to ensure that someone who *actually* would use the document to demand their rights was able to clearly understand what the document was saying, and that is clear in the finished document. In her "My Day" column on February 12, 1947, Roosevelt wrote about her role in the drafting process as

...I may be able to help them put into words the high thoughts which they can gather from past history and from the actuality of the contemporary situation, so that the average human being can understand and strive for the objectives set forth. I used to tell my husband that, if he could make me understand something, it would be clear to all the other people in the country—and perhaps that will be my real value on this drafting commission!⁵³

While Eleanor was selling herself short when it came to her ability to understand current affairs in this column, her intentions were important. So often, political jargon is lost on the people who call upon the documents that are being argued about, so why not strive to make the objectives of the UDHR clear? Morsink writes about this: "More than once, Roosevelt, as chair, felt it necessary to remind 'the representatives of [the need for] a clear, brief text, which could be readily understood by the ordinary man and woman.' The Declaration, she often said, 'was not intended for philosophers and jurists but for the ordinary people.'"⁵⁴ This is just one example of the influence Roosevelt had on the UDHR, as the completed document *is* easy to read and

⁵³ Roosevelt, "My Day," December 22, 1945.

⁵⁴ Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

comprehend. Her unique role as the overseer of the document's composition and construction allowed for her to have such a say in the words that were used.

Along the lines of the importance of the document being easily accessible to all, Roosevelt was also concerned with the rights of the individual. She believed in individual rights over the rights of the government which makes sense as she advocated for individuals' rights while serving on Committee Three. However, everyone was not in agreement with the rights of the individual being the most important thing to emphasize, and this was one of the first of many debates in the drafting committee. The Soviets believed that the right of the individual had to be in the context of their government and not solely on the basis of being a person.⁵⁵ Roosevelt's position of individual over society was the prevailing one, as can be seen in the completed version of the document. In her book titled *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Mary Ann Glendon writes of Eleanor's emphasis on the rights of the individual:

It seems to me that in much that is before us, the rights of the individual are extremely important. It is not exactly that you set the individual apart from his society, but you recognize that within any society the individual must have rights that are guarded...I think we do have to make sure, in writing a bill of rights, that we safeguard the fundamental freedoms of the individual.⁵⁶

Roosevelt's views regarding the individual were consistent with how she handled her work on Committee Three, in which she was in favor of refugees and displaced persons choosing where they would reside and not being tied down to the country in which they were born. She believed

⁵⁵ Glendon, *A World Made New*.

⁵⁶ Glendon.

that one should not be punished for being born somewhere, and should have the same rights as anyone else on the basis of being human.

An aspect of the drafting process that cannot be understated was the overall political climate in which it was being drafted. It was the beginning of the Cold War and post-World War II reconstruction was underway. Tensions were high, especially between the West and its allies and the Soviet Union. No one else could have navigated this with as much optimism and energy as Eleanor Roosevelt. Morsink writes about Eleanor's unique role in being the mediator between the Soviet Union and the West. He writes,

In this position she made the unique contribution of serving as a buffer between the two Cold War camps. In the years 1946-1948 there was no other public figure dedicated to the cause of human rights who was respected and trusted by both of the great powers. Very few other American diplomats could have worked with the Soviet Union the way Roosevelt did without having undercut domestic support for the project. During one of her trips to Britain a GI asked her how to get along with the Russians. She responded with four quick points: have convictions; be friendly; stick to your beliefs; and work as hard as they do. The reports of the more than 150 UN meetings which she chaired provide ample proof that she consistently practiced what she preached to that GI.⁵⁷

It was evident in the way Eleanor conducted herself as Chair of the committee that she was committed to the causes of the document and less concerned with the politics between nations. She was always trying to keep the drafting process moving and did not want to be worrying about the politics that existed outside of the UN. According to one of the key drafters, John Humphrey, politics did not play a primary role in the negotiations in the formative years of the UN in which the UDHR was drafted. He writes,

⁵⁷ Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

... the curtain went up on 27 January 1947. The Cold War had already begun, and the difficulties which faced the commission and all the uncertainties inherent in a new undertaking were compounded by political controversy and recrimination. But politics nevertheless played a secondary role in the early years and, by United Nations standards, the commission performed its mandate well.⁵⁸

He claims that politics played a secondary role in the beginning, but soon enough Eleanor Roosevelt would be used and exploited by the State Department in their reactionary Cold War tactics. The US State Department could have really taken advantage of Roosevelt's intentions in the drafting process and used her as a buffer to alleviate some of the tensions, but they did not. Her ability to get along with the Soviets in a friendly manner did not last long. Humphrey writes, "In the early years, Mrs. Roosevelt's prestige with the Russians was enormous, and had the state department been more imaginative, she might have become a much more important influence for the promotion of international understanding. But unfortunately she was soon exploited for short-term Cold War objectives, and in the later years her great prestige was partly dissipated."⁵⁹ It is quite upsetting to realize the ways the State Department used Roosevelt when she had the potential to make great strides as a mediator between the Soviet Union and the West.

In a speech Roosevelt gave toward the end of the drafting process, on September 28, 1948 titled "The Struggle for Human Rights," it became clear to most, especially Humphrey, that she was being used by the State Department as a puppet of their Cold War objectives. In this speech at the Sorbonne in Paris, Roosevelt attacks the USSR and their way of governing. She says, "There are basic differences that show up even in the use of words between a democratic and a totalitarian country. For instance 'democracy' means one thing to the U.S.S.R. and another to the

⁵⁸ Humphrey, *Human Rights & the United Nations*.

⁵⁹ Humphrey.

U.S.A. and, I know, in France.”⁶⁰ She goes on to criticize the entire way of governance that the Soviets perform. Humphrey writes about the shock of hearing this speech in a crowded amphitheater. He says,

The great amphitheater was packed by an enthusiastic audience which gave her a reception the like of which I have seldom witnessed... But Mrs. Roosevelt lost a great opportunity. The crowd had come to hear the chairman of the Human Rights Commission and the widow of a great president. It heard a speech obviously written by someone in the state department and chiefly devoted to attacking the Soviet Union. I didn't blame the Americans for talking back, but I disliked their using Mrs. Roosevelt in these polemics. For she had become a symbol which should have been kept above the Cold War – a symbol around which reasonable men and women everywhere might have rallied. When after the meeting I joined Laugier and some of his friends for a drink... we all agreed that Mrs. Roosevelt's international position had been compromised.⁶¹

It is certainly disheartening to read stories such as these, as it was clear to all those around Roosevelt that she was being used by the US government, even though her intentions were clear and concerned with human rights and passing this declaration. She had the potential to mend some of the tension-filled relationships, but was used for the short-term Cold War agenda instead.

* * *

Roosevelt seldom missed a meeting while drafting the declaration, but when she did her absence was felt by all. Morsink writes about the way Eleanor was able to hold a room and keep arguments at bay. He writes of this,

Most of the meetings were conducted in a calm and orderly fashion, with only occasional rhetorical excesses. Roosevelt's boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm kept the

⁶⁰ “The Struggle for Human Rights (1948) | Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project | The George Washington University.”

⁶¹ Humphrey, *Human Rights & the United Nations*.

proceedings on track. She was a competent parliamentarian whose personal integrity kept the chair at the center of authority. Her rulings were very seldom questioned and when they were, usually by the delegate from the Soviet Union, they were upheld. During the Second Session of the Commission held in Geneva, a reporter from the *New York Times* dispatched the comment that ‘the proceedings sometimes turn into a long vitriolic attack on the U.S. when she is not present. . . . These attacks, however, generally degenerate into flurries in the face of her calm and undisturbed replies.’⁶²

Just imagining the scene of these men who think their opinions are superior arguing about the wording of the articles and what to include and what not to is intimidating. Being in charge of keeping them on track and finishing the document in such a short amount of time was a massive feat that Roosevelt accomplished. As has been discussed at length in this chapter, John Humphrey, the delegate of Canada, thought very highly of Roosevelt and her abilities to be the Chair of this commission. He was not alone in those feelings. Morsink writes about Charles Malik, the delegate of Lebanon and Roosevelt’s successor as the Human Rights Commission’s Chair. He writes, “Charles Malik has said of the Commission that he ‘didn’t see how they could have accomplished what they did without her presence.’ Her lack of cynicism kept the hope of San Francisco alive, while at the same time, as a determined and efficient chair, she pushed the proceedings toward a successful conclusion.”⁶³ She had promised to be a harsh driver when she was elected Chair, and her consistent motivation and eternal optimism is what allowed the declaration to be completed in such a short amount of time.

It was Roosevelt’s belief in the United Nations, and more specifically the UDHR, that allowed her to remain positive about the sometimes intense meetings of the drafting committee.

⁶² Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

⁶³ Morsink.

In the *Foreign Affairs* article written a few months before the document was finished that is referenced above, Roosevelt claimed,

It seems to me most important that the Declaration be accepted by all member nations, not because they will immediately live up to all of its provisions, but because they ought to support the standards toward which the nations must henceforward aim. Since the objectives have been clearly stated, men of good will everywhere will strive to attain them with more energy and, I trust, with better hope of success.⁶⁴

Her optimism and hope for the UDHR is both admirable and inspiring. She worked tirelessly to make sure the UDHR was finished in a reasonable amount of time and that people everywhere would understand that they had rights on the basis of being human and those rights could not be taken away by their governments. Although her aspirations for the UDHR and the UN have not been seen through in their entirety, human rights activists (and human rights majors!) must not let her hopes die.

In regards to the wording of the specific articles, Mrs. Roosevelt caught some heat from various women's groups in the US and the only other woman on the drafting committee, Hansa Mehta of India, for her agreement of the word "men" rather than "human beings." Glendon writes about this in her book discussed earlier saying,

Koretsky objected to the words all men...Mrs. Roosevelt resisted the criticism, observing that, in English, 'when we say 'all men are brothers,' we mean that all human beings are brothers, and we are not differentiating between men and women.' She added, 'I have always considered myself a feminist but I really would have no objection to the use of the word as the Committee sees it.'⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Roosevelt, "The Promise of Human Rights."

⁶⁵ Glendon, *A World Made New*.

Koretsky was the USSR delegate and he and Mehta were not in agreement with this language choice. Roosevelt's version of feminism was not the most inclusive, as she did not always take the most liberal stances as she did with many other issues. She believed men and women were different and should be treated as such, while also believing that women should have the same opportunities as men. It is challenging to insert her version of feminism into the 21st century, as feminism has evolved so much since Eleanor had the opportunity to speak her opinion on the matter. However, her not advocating for the removal of "men" certainly turned heads. The Mehta-Koretsky camp won in the end, as Article 1 reads "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."⁶⁶ The version Roosevelt advocated for started with "All men..." It is refreshing to see a document read the way this one does and not like the Declaration of Independence, for instance, in which the word "woman" does not appear once, not because it's authors included women under the umbrella term "men", but because the authors granted women no rights. The more inclusive language of the UDHR makes it more of a timeless and easily called upon/understood document than it could have been had Roosevelt won that argument.

While Roosevelt seemed to have a grip on the drafting committee to those around her, such as Malik and Humphrey, internally she doubted her abilities constantly. President Truman did not doubt Eleanor's abilities at any point in the drafting process, and it was in part their thorough correspondence that prevented her from stepping down. In their correspondence he often thanked her for her work for the UN, the US and the world. In one letter written on March 22, 1948, the year the UDHR was passed, Roosevelt wrote to Truman telling him that she had

⁶⁶ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

offered her resignation to the UN because she felt it would look bad for the US to have her criticize the Truman Administration's attitudes on Palestine, among other decisions.⁶⁷ Truman's response to her proves just how much he believed in her abilities and valued her role, despite her criticisms of his administration at times, when he wrote back to her on March 25, 1948:

I should deplore as calamitous your withdrawal from the work of the United Nations at this crucial time. Such a step is unthinkable. The United Nations, our own nation, indeed the world, needs the counsel and leadership which you can bring to its deliberations... May I appeal to you with the utmost sincerity to abandon any thought of relinquishing the post which you hold and for which you have unique qualifications. There is no one who could, at this time, exercise the influence which you can exert on the side of peace.⁶⁸

It has been said that Eleanor was deeply moved by these words from Truman, and although she continued to question some of the administration's decisions, she stayed at the UN. This is not the only letter in which he commended her for her service, but it is clear here that he was afraid to lose her voice at the UN. His motives may have been for his own re-election purposes, as having her as part of the Truman Administration was a good look for him, but either way he acknowledged Roosevelt's contributions to the UN as invaluable.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Joseph Lash tallies the final votes in his book *Eleanor: The Years Alone*, "The final vote was 48 countries in favor, none against, 2 absent, and 8 abstentions, mostly of Soviet bloc countries. The Assembly delegates, in recognition of Mrs. Roosevelt's leadership, accorded her the rare personal tribute of a standing ovation."⁶⁹ Roosevelt expected some

⁶⁷ Roosevelt and Truman, *Eleanor and Harry*.

⁶⁸ Roosevelt and Truman.

⁶⁹ Lash, *Eleanor*.

abstentions, writing in her “My Day” column on December 10, 1948, “It is, of course, true that any document, wherein 58 nations collaborate, is apt not to seem perfect to any one of them.”⁷⁰ Roosevelt knew that the UDHR would not immediately be put into effect and followed by every state who signed onto it. That was not the goal of the document, either. Rather, it is a document that is meant for countries around the world to strive toward. Human rights are ideals that are not easy to achieve when domestic politics act as a hindrance. She hoped that the UDHR would be a living document that was referenced and relevant for years to come. Roosevelt truly believed in the document and its potential, as is evident here: “...This Declaration may well become the international Magna Carter of all men everywhere. We hope its proclamation by the General Assembly will be an event comparable to the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French people in 1789, the adoption of the Bill of Rights by the people of the United States...”⁷¹ The Epilogue will explore the ways in which the document has been used and the ways in which it has potential for future use.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s role in the drafting of the UDHR was a unique one. While she did not actually write any of the articles, she was the chief driver behind keeping the drafting process moving. She kept the drafters on task, urged them to put aside their philosophical debates and focus on the document, and made sure everyone was keeping up with the steady pace that was needed to finish the document with such speed. As has been discussed at length, many who were part of the drafting process believed that no one else could have accomplished what Roosevelt had. She influenced the document in profound ways, some with positive effects and others not so much. One thing that can be agreed upon is that Roosevelt touched many parts of the document.

⁷⁰ Roosevelt, “My Day by Eleanor Roosevelt, December 10, 1948.”

⁷¹ Glendon, *A World Made New*.

Her belief in human rights and the power of a United Nations organization creating a document that had the opinions of so many nations shone through in her role as Chair. She headed the creation of one of the most critical documents of the 20th century, and it set the tone for human rights in the US and abroad.



Fig. 1: Eleanor Roosevelt holding the completed UDHR.⁷²

⁷² "Declaration of Human Rights by Eleanor Roosevelt."

Epilogue: A Call to Teeth

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

It is difficult to defend the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as it stands today. Little known are the ways in which the UDHR has been successful or actually advanced human rights internationally. Perhaps it could be improved. First, it is important to understand and recognize some of the ways in which the UDHR *has* been successful. Some countries have adopted the specific language of the UDHR into their constitutions. Other countries have called upon the right to self-determination to successfully free themselves from the reigns of colonialism. The UDHR was a jumping off point for many UN charters and treaties that would be much more specific than the UDHR. Yet, the peaceful world that Chair Eleanor Roosevelt dreamed of is nowhere in sight. Ways in which the UDHR can be implemented and called upon by average people in concrete ways to really enact change bear examination.

I. Implementing the Articles Domestically

The UDHR has been interpreted in a number of ways since it was written in 1948. Often it has been used by groups of people to call on their rights or by national governments who are

writing and rewriting their constitutions. In his book titled *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, Paul Gordon Lauren discusses the ways in which the UDHR was successful in the first 50 years after it was written. He touches on the ways the document has been incorporated in constitutions, called upon to decolonize many countries in Africa, and how the document sparked the drafting of many other UN documents and treaties that are much more specific than the UDHR. On the topic of using the actual language in various countries' constitutions, Lauren writes, "...the Universal Declaration began to have an immediate impact. New laws and constitutions, including those of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Libya, Puerto Rico, and Syria, incorporated its specific language or principles into their texts."⁷³ It is noteworthy that so many of these nations were once colonies and upon gaining sovereignty wrote constitutions that incorporated the UDHR so heavily. The many countries that incorporated the specific language of the document can be found across all the geographic regions of the world, which should be considered a testament as to how far reaching the UDHR actually was.

To me, using the actual language of the document in constitutions and laws seems like the *most* effective way to implement the UDHR and enforce its goals into specific countries. Of course this approach will take many years and the cooperation of many countries who are not willing to compromise on much. Yet, taking the words that the drafters strained over and including them in individual constitutions and documents that carry legal weight seems like the most realistic approach at the present moment. If enough countries were to adopt the articles of the UDHR into their constitutions, then it would almost be as if the entire world shared one universal declaration of rights that each country abided by and enforced in a way that did not

⁷³ Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights*.

undermine the national sovereignty that so many countries hold so dear to their hearts. Until the UN can come up with a successful tribunal for holding countries accountable who sign onto these international treaties, the accountability has to come from within the nations themselves. Indeed, it would be quite challenging to successfully propose that a country like the United States fundamentally change its constitution, but implementing intentional amendments that call upon the language of the UDHR would be immense progress.

II. The Right to Self-Determination

In Africa, many countries gained their independence from colonialism by asserting the right to self-determination. Though this right is not stated directly in the UDHR, the right to self-determination is indeed cited in the UN Charter and in other, more specific UN documents that came after the UDHR was adopted. In an attempt to not grossly oversimplify the way self-determination was used and the results of decolonization, I want to note that decolonization was not an entirely successful story for many nations in Africa, and there is much more to discuss than what is presented here. Adom Getachew's book titled *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* discusses decolonization and the right to self-determination in a much different way than most works do. She makes it clear that the rise of self-determination and nation-building are not synonymous and that the story is much more complicated than such. Getachew writes,

... the emergence of the nation-state as the normative unit of the international order also provided occasion to rethink the conditions in which a system of states might overcome imperial hierarchy and domination. In this context, nationalists argued that in the absence of legal, political, and economic institutions that realized an international principle of nondomination, the domestic politics of post-colonial states were constantly vulnerable to external encroachment and intervention. Worldmaking was thus envisioned as the

correlate to nation-building, and self-determination stood at their nexus. In its domestic face, self-determination entailed a democratic politics of postcolonial citizenship through which the postcolonial state secured economic development and redistribution. In its international face, self-determination created the external conditions for this domestic politics by transforming conditions of international hierarchy that facilitated dependence and domination.⁷⁴

Getachew is arguing that self-determination and decolonization were attempts to reconstruct the international world order. The task of calling on the right to self-determination to successfully decolonize was incredibly ambitious and likely much more than the UDHR drafters could have ever imagined a UN document being used to do.

Decolonization is widely considered one of the greatest international human rights achievements to date. Paul Gordon Lauren touches on self-determination and its power in his book as well. He writes,

In just a few years, decolonization destroyed empires often built up over centuries, liberated vast territories from colonial rule, transferred power from whites to nonwhites, and secured the right of self-determination for more than one billion people. Indeed, one participant describes it as nothing short of ‘the greatest extension and achievement of human rights in the history of the world.’⁷⁵

Using human rights as one tool of many to overthrow colonial rule is a remarkable accomplishment and one that cannot be overlooked. Isn’t that all the drafters could have hoped for, a document that is living and being interpreted in a number of ways to different degrees?

⁷⁴ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

⁷⁵ Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights*.

The range from incorporating the language of the document into domestic constitutions to using the language from the UDHR and various human rights treaties to fight for and achieve independence are two very different but equally important ways that the UDHR has been put into practice.

III. Legally Binding?

A natural question would be, why not make the UDHR have legal consequences or propose it be legally binding? I have not fleshed out how exactly this process would work, but it does not even seem worth it to try and come up with a solution. The short answer is that no (maybe one or two) countries would have signed onto the UDHR if it had legal consequences. It is important to remember that the UDHR was drafted shortly after the end of World War II, so tensions were high. Besides the high tensions and strained relations, most countries involved in the war violated the human rights of either their own citizens or those they were fighting, so signing a document with legal consequences for violating human rights was not in the cards for many of these nations.

Had the UDHR been legally binding, the United States certainly would not have been a signatory of the document, considering it is not a member of the International Criminal Court, as most, if not all, US presidents would be tried for war crimes or other crimes against humanity. The US made sure that Eleanor Roosevelt was a staunch advocate for the UDHR being a document that only carried moral weight. Whether or not she entirely believed what she was being told to say is another debate, but nevertheless she advocated for the morally binding document that we ended up with. In the post-World War II/Cold War atmosphere, it was already a miracle that the document was written and signed by as many countries as it was. This

“miracle” can be precisely attributed to the fact that the document carried only moral weight and *not* political weight. It is hard to imagine the document ever having been finished in the first place if there were concrete consequences for countries who did not follow it. The United Nations was not prepared, and arguably still is not prepared, to hold countries accountable for violating the human rights of people in substantial ways.

IV. The Root(s) of the Problem

It is not fair to critique the UDHR without critiquing the entirety of the United Nations and its structure. There is so much potential for the UN to make real changes in the world, but in order for the organization to do so, all countries must be willing to make sacrifices for the betterment of the world that at times may compromise national sovereignty in the name of human rights. As a nearly impossible task at best, this has been the major challenge. Most governments lack morals, and without the fear of legal consequences, why would a world power, such as the United States, bother adhering to a document that was seen as merely a symbolic triumph? For these reasons, it has always struck me as ridiculous that the headquarters of the UN are in the United States, as the US is one of the worst offenders of human rights, actively making human rights situations worse abroad and at home through endless wars and inhumane treatment of immigrants, racial minorities, and women. I truly believe that by having the headquarters in the United States, the United Nations loses a bit of its credibility as a global organization for progress and the advancement of human rights. I am not entirely sure where the headquarters should be, but perhaps having only one headquarters for what is supposed to be a global organization is part of the problem.

The United Nations has many flaws at its core. Take internships, for example. If an undergraduate or recent college graduate is interested in interning at the UN, they would be expected to work a 35-hour week unpaid, and be based in New York City (if looking to intern in the US).⁷⁶ Therefore, an intern would somehow have to work outside of the full time internship to be able to afford to live in NYC. More than likely, however, the intern would have to be born into a wealthy family to be able to afford this unpaid internship opportunity, thus continuing the classist cycle that exists in so many organizations that are supposed to be advocating for the rights of people. The devastating paradox of the United Nations, the defenders of the rights of everyone – including labor rights – expecting interns to work full-time for no pay or benefits cruelly undermines the core principles for which this institution was established to spread.

Though the arguments listed above may seem to place full blame on the UDHR and the UN, neither a document such as the UDHR, nor any organization, such as the UN, should be blamed for failing to support, defend, and empower people. People fail people. No document will ever hold enough power to solve all of the world's problems, despite the consequences one might face for breaking their oath to a declaration or an organization. Until human rights are taken seriously on the merit that all humans deserve to live decent lives and have access to necessities and even some luxuries, no real change will occur. Changing the minds of people and convincing them to care about others is no easy feat, and it is one that is exhausting and deflating. It is people who run governments and people who write declarations and treaties and laws. Many people in power do not care for the well being of others as they should, and until that happens, we will likely be socially stuck in the same stagnant place we have been for so long. The only

⁷⁶ “UN Careers.”

way this world will ever be able to actually take human rights seriously and treat them as important as is necessary is if society moves beyond caring about capital more than people and creates effective structures of accountability. Under the confines of capitalism and the obsession with wealth, advocating for the rights of underprivileged people will never actually be at the forefront of an organization or a government. This activism will only ever be in the name of making more money and increasing capital for those in power, which begs the question: can the United Nations stand for human rights if it is not anti-capitalist?

V. Internal Biases

I had always thought that the UDHR's sole purpose was to be available for individuals to call upon and demand the rights that their governments decided they did not need or were not worthy of. Maybe this was because of the emphasis on the rights of the individual that are so prevalent in the US and other western countries. Further, the rights of the individual were so important to Eleanor Roosevelt and practically forced out of her mouth when she had to advocate for the importance of the UDHR being a moral document as well as something individuals could call upon. Was this because the key drafters knew that an individual holds much less power than a collective? If one were to think about the context in which the document was written, it makes sense that the drafters would focus on the rights of the individual. With a world war fresh in everyone's minds, the idea of a collective of people calling upon this document to demand rights that so few actually have would be a scary thought. An individual trying to advocate for their own rights, however, feels less intimidating and more symbolic because an individual does not hold a significant amount of power against a government, or an international organization such as

the UN. An individual is not seen as a threat to the sovereignty of a nation or to the colonial system in the same way that a collective can be seen.

VI. Hanging Onto Hope

I have spent a lot of time learning about the UDHR in an academic setting, especially as a human rights major. It usually goes the same: read the document, think about the articles, maybe even pick a favorite. Then discuss how the document has failed and move on. I have always felt like there has to be more to this story, but maybe it has been thought about at length and people feel exhausted trying to think of how this document written in the 1940s could be better. This is not to say that when discussing the document in an academic setting there is no critical thinking involved. It is more to say that the attitudes of most fellow students and professors is that it was an impressive feat that it was written, but other than that it is largely just symbolic. I, however, am not quite ready to give up on this document. I am still of the opinion that it was a monumental achievement for the human rights movement internationally to have this document to call upon, even if just for moral purposes. It was a crucial starting point for a movement that did not exist prior, and that is just the beginning. Human rights once seemed like such a far-fetched ideal, and now we are seeing movements in the name of human rights and organizations dedicated to advancing human rights all over the globe.

Clearly, changing the language of a countries' constitution is not an easy task, nor a frequent one, but I believe the UDHR has a chance if the words and articles are implemented into constitutions around the globe. There is something to be said about the articles and their language holding up in 2021, over 70 years after it was written. The UDHR is very much a living document, and the dust has not settled. There is still time for the hopes of Eleanor Roosevelt and

the other drafters of the document to come to fruition. For Eleanor's sake, as well as for the sake of Human Rights across the globe, I am not willing to give up on the potential power of the UDHR just yet.

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Appendix A

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, therefore,

The General Assembly,

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any

discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11

1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.