

Eleanor - The Radical Roosevelt Deserves Her Own Worthy Film

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Eleanor Roosevelt, an important historical figure, has never been depicted in movies, including "Hyde Park on Hudson" accurately. It's about time!

Many younger Americans probably know very little about Eleanor Roosevelt, and if their first encounter with her is the new film *Hyde Park on Hudson*, what they'll learn is incredibly misleading and inaccurate. Other films - including *Sunrise At Campobello* (1960), the two-part *Eleanor & Franklin* HBO mini-series (1976), *Eleanor, First Lady of the World* (1982) and *Warm Springs* (2005) - have depicted different aspects of her life. But Hollywood can't seem to make a film that accurately portrays the depth and influence of Eleanor's radicalism.

Hyde Park on Hudson focuses on the relationship between her husband, President Franklin Roosevelt (played by Bill Murray) and his distant cousin Margaret "Daisy" Stuckley (Laura Linney) during a weekend in 1939 when the King and Queen of England are visiting the Roosevelts at their second home in upstate New York. The film shows FDR and Stuckley having a sexual love affair, although many historians believe that their relationship was primarily a flirtation. Given its focus on the affair, perhaps it is not surprising that the film treats Eleanor (Olivia Williams) primarily as a ceremonial helpmate whose major function was to help FDR negotiate the social rituals of being president. In the film, the biggest controversy Eleanor dealt with was whether to serve hot dogs to the British royals.

In reality, Eleanor's life - before she met FDR, during the 12 years she served as First Lady and after FDR died in 1945 - was filled with important public controversies, including her activism around such issues as workers' rights, civil rights, women's rights and human rights. She became FDR's most important, and most progressive, adviser. FDR was the most powerful president in American history, and Eleanor (who died 50 years ago last month) wielded her own power, sometimes behind the scenes but often in public, breaking the mold for first ladies. No first lady before or since - not even Hillary Clinton - has had as much influence while her husband was president.

Eleanor consistently pushed FDR to the left on key issues and appointments. The left-leaning members of FDR's inner circle (including Labor Secretary Francis Perkins, Agriculture Secretary, and later Vice President, Henry Wallace and Harry Hopkins, who formulated and ran many New Deal relief programs) often conspired with Eleanor to make sure he heard the views of progressive activists.

Throughout her life, Eleanor fought on behalf of America's, and the world's, most vulnerable people. Over time, she became friends with a widening circle of union activists, feminists, civil rights crusaders and radicals whose ideas



Eleanor Roosevelt speaking at the United Nations in July 1947. (Photo: [US Government](#))

she embraced and advocated for - both as FDR's wife and adviser and as a political figure in her own right.

Born in 1884 and descended from a long line of privilege, Eleanor nevertheless had a difficult childhood. Her father, Elliott Roosevelt, was an early influence on her social consciousness, taking her with him when he visited the Children's Aid Society or served up Thanksgiving dinner to newsboys. By the time Roosevelt was 10, both her parents had died. She was sent to live with her maternal grandmother, a formidable woman who wanted to groom her for New York's elite society. Her prominent relatives included her uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, who became president when Eleanor was 17.

Her early education consisted of a private tutor and a year in an Italian convent school. Her first and most influential mentor was Marie Souvestre, who ran Allenswood, a feminist, progressive boarding school for girls outside London that Eleanor attended from 1898 to 1902. The school taught classical languages and the arts, and Souvestre gave Roosevelt special instruction in history and philosophy. Souvestre was a demanding thinker who challenged her students with her liberal ideas against colonialism and anti-Semitism. She invited Eleanor to be her traveling companion through France and Italy during holiday breaks from school and encouraged her to be an independent and confident woman.

In 1902, Eleanor's grandmother insisted she return to the United States to get down to the business of becoming a debutante. Eleanor was nearly 6 feet tall and willowy, with prominent teeth and a weak chin - not the social belle that her mother had been and that her grandmother wished her to be.

Eleanor quickly realized that she preferred volunteering with social reform groups to going to fancy balls. From 1902 to 1903, she volunteered at the Riverton Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side, teaching exercise and dance to low-income immigrants. Unlike her peers, who arrived in carriages, she insisted on taking public transportation, forcing herself to overcome her fears and walking even at night through the Bowery, a low-rent area.

She also became immersed in the National Consumers League (NCL), led by pioneering social reformer Florence Kelley. Through the NCL, she investigated and publicized dreadful working conditions in garment factories, known as sweatshops. She also met many progressive activists who shaped her political consciousness.

In 1902, she was riding a train when her distant cousin Franklin, a Harvard student, happened to board, and they spent the next two hours in easy conversation. That began their discreet romance, which he at first kept hidden from his domineering mother. It was by accompanying Eleanor that Franklin was first exposed to New York's dismal tenements. For the rest of their marriage, Eleanor was FDR's unofficial guide and conscience regarding the suffering of the poor, workers, African Americans and women.

They were married in 1905, when she was 20 and he 22, with her Uncle Theodore walking her down the aisle. During the first several years of marriage and young motherhood, she grew increasingly depressed under the thumb of her mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt, who insisted on running the household. Eleanor was able to escape Sara's domination when the couple moved to Albany, New York, after FDR was elected to the state legislature in 1910. She learned that she had a gift for politics and soon became one of FDR's most trusted advisers. She also lobbied for causes she believed in - eliminating poverty, improving working conditions, women's rights and education - and was better at connecting with people than was FDR.

By 1916, the couple had had six children, including one son who died as a baby. Franklin's appointment as assistant secretary of the Navy in 1913 brought the Roosevelts to Washington, DC, and was the beginning of national prominence. It also marked a difficult turning point in their relationship, when Eleanor discovered Franklin's long-term affair with her social secretary Lucy Mercer, one of several of FDR's extra-marital relationships. Deeply distressed, she offered him a divorce. They remained married, however, in a loyal political partnership. Eleanor

turned to others for emotional support and intimacy. According to her biographer, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor loved and frequently traveled with Lorena Hickok, an AP reporter assigned to follow her when she was the First Lady. Their daily letters included both political observations and expressions of love.

World War I offered Eleanor an outlet for her organizing talents. She organized a Union Station canteen for American soldiers on their way to training camps, led Red Cross activities, supervised the knitting rooms at the Navy League and spoke at patriotic rallies. She visited wounded soldiers in the hospital and led an effort to improve conditions at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a mental hospital in Washington.

During the Red Scare following World War I, Eleanor renewed her reform impulses. She became active in several groups that the attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, considered dangerously radical. She coordinated the League of Women Voters' legislative efforts, mobilizing members to lobby for bills. In 1922, she joined the Women's Trade Union League of working-class women and radical activists. She taught classes, raised money and participated in the WTUL's policy debates and legislative actions, including working for bills to regulate maximum hours and minimum wages for women workers. Through the WTUL, Eleanor forged a long-term friendship with Rose Schneiderman - a socialist union organizer from New York - with whom she walked picket lines. J. Edgar Hoover, a close aide to Palmer who later became FBI director, kept a file on Eleanor for many years.

As FDR's political fortunes rose - first to governor of New York in 1928 and then to president in 1932 - Eleanor constantly had to find her footing as a public person. While governor, FDR was stricken with polio, which left him unable to walk. Eleanor became his eyes and ears, investigating conditions at hospitals, asylums and prisons.

Eleanor's involvement with reform movements prepared her to become the most influential and politically progressive First Lady in American history. "No one who ever saw Eleanor Roosevelt sit down facing her husband and holding his eyes firmly [and saying] to him 'Franklin, I think you should' or, 'Franklin, surely you will not' will ever forget the experience," wrote Rexford Tugwell, a key FDR aide.

She became a key player in the Democratic Party, not only mobilizing voters, but also pushing the party to support progressive legislation and to give women a larger voice in party affairs. She effectively pushed FDR to appoint women (including Perkins, the first woman Cabinet member) to key positions in government. She developed a tight circle of close women friends and social reformers who were her main confidants.

When she became First Lady in 1933, Eleanor devoted considerable time to those hardest hit by poverty, visiting an encampment of World War I veterans (called Bonus Marchers) in Washington, sharecroppers in the South, and people on breadlines in San Francisco and in the slums of Puerto Rico. Her public support for union organizing drives among coal miners, garment workers, textile workers and tenant farmers (including the racially integrated and left-wing Southern Tenant Farmers Union) lent visibility and credibility to their efforts. Eleanor was a longtime supporter and an occasional visitor to the Highlander Folk School, a radical training center for labor and civil rights activists in rural Tennessee.

As First Lady, Roosevelt donated the proceeds from her 1932-1933 radio broadcasts to the Women's Trade Union League and promoted the WTUL in her columns and speeches. She invited women and union activists, including Schneiderman, to the White House and Hyde Park, seating them next to FDR so he could hear their concerns. As Schneiderman recalled in her autobiography, Eleanor overcame the trappings of privilege to become "a born trade unionist."

Soon after becoming First Lady, she began holding her own press conferences, for women reporters only, in part to preserve their jobs during the Depression. Her influence was such that the president often had her float ideas to journalists and others to see how they would fly politically.

Eleanor was much bolder than FDR in opposing racism, segregation and lynching. She became a close friend of Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), serving as his advocate within the White House, and she made a point of publicly joining the civil rights organization. She urged FDR to support federal legislation to end lynching, but he refused to support the bill, worried that southern white voters - almost all of them loyal Democrats - would abandon the party.

In November 1938, 1,500 people, African Americans and whites, packed the city auditorium in Birmingham, Alabama, to kick off a four-day Southern Conference on Human Welfare. The gathering was organized to address the South's serious social problems - including poverty, poor education and the infamous poll tax that prevented black citizens from voting. The next morning, the auditorium was surrounded by police. Police Commissioner Bull Connor ordered the integrated crowd to separate their seating according to race or face arrest. The crowd obeyed, with black people sitting on one side and white people on the other. Eleanor arrived later, accompanied by African American educator Mary McLeod Bethune and Aubrey Williams, head of the New Deal's National Youth Administration. Eleanor sized up the situation and sat down on the side with the African Americans. One of the policemen tapped her on the shoulder and told her to move. Instead, she calmly moved her chair between the white and black sections and there she remained.

On civil rights issues, she agitated; he waffled. But sometimes she prevailed. In 1939, she resigned in protest from the Daughters of the American Revolution after that organization refused to rent its Constitution Hall to opera singer Marian Anderson, who had previously sung at the White House. Instead, Roosevelt worked behind the scenes to arrange for Anderson to sing to 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial. In February 1940, she shared the stage with the NAACP's Roy Wilkins and the Socialist Party's Norman Thomas at a National Sharecroppers Week forum at a New York hotel. Later that year, she persuaded FDR to meet with the NAACP's White, and labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, who were threatening to hold a mass march on Washington to protest the exclusion of African Americans from key defense industry jobs as the nation was preparing for war. After two meetings, FDR agreed to issue an executive order against racial discrimination in defense employment if the civil rights leaders would cancel their proposed march. He did, and they did.

Eleanor developed a strong voice as a public speaker and prolific writer of magazine articles and books. Her syndicated column, "My Day," about her life in the White House, appeared six times a week in some 180 papers around the country. She also lectured and spoke frequently on the radio. Through her column and radio broadcasts, she described the desperate conditions and human suffering she saw during her travels, but she also gave voice to the activists fighting for change and the people helped by the New Deal's relief programs.

The American people found Eleanor approachable and caring, even as she was ridiculed in the press as being both dowdy and a publicity hound. During her first year in the White House, more than 300,000 people wrote to her. She personally answered many of the letters and forwarded the rest to federal agencies for a response.

Eleanor was actively involved for decades in promoting peace and international understanding as well. She tried to convince FDR to support the Permanent Court of International Justice, commonly called the World Court, which had been set up after World War I to settle disputes among nations. Privately FDR agreed with the idea, but he considered it politically too risky and allowed the Senate to reject US membership in the court by a seven-vote margin.

Starting in 1939, as the Nazis were engaged in genocide against Jews, Eleanor fought for special legislation to admit Jewish refugees, especially children, to the United States, but without FDR's public support the idea went nowhere.

During World War II - in which all four of the Roosevelt sons served - Eleanor visited troops in London and in the South Pacific. She won over Admiral William Halsey, who had derided her for what he considered her do-goodism

and meddling, when she spent exhausting days personally comforting wounded soldiers. "She alone had accomplished more good than any other person, or any group of civilians, who had passed through my area," Halsey said.

After FDR's death in 1945, Eleanor assumed she would retire, but the new president, Harry S. Truman, sought her advice. He also appointed her to the five-person US delegation at the first meeting of the UN General Assembly, held in London in 1946. She played a surprising and pivotal role, addressing the full assembly, without notes, and swaying the vote against forced repatriation of refugees, allowing them to choose where they wished to settle.

For three years, Eleanor lobbied, debated, and maneuvered to get the United Nations to adopt a statement on human rights. In 1948, she chaired the UN Human Rights Commission, and under her leadership the General Assembly, meeting in Paris, passed at 3 a.m. on December 10, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a landmark document that still serves as a benchmark for activists around the world.

Throughout the 1950s, Eleanor remained active in public affairs. She continued to write her newspaper column, endorsed and campaigned for liberal Democrats, appeared frequently on television and radio shows discussing current events and averaged 150 speaking lectures a year in the United States and around the world.

At the height of the Cold War, Eleanor challenged the prevailing political wisdom. In 1953, for example, she was a charter subscriber to I.F. Stone's Weekly, a controversial political newsletter written by the radical journalist whom conservatives and even some liberals accused of being a subversive. In 1960, she spoke to 20,000 people at Madison Square Garden - along with socialist Norman Thomas, labor leader Walter Reuther, civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph and singer Harry Belafonte - at a rally against the escalating arms race between the US and Russia, sponsored by the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy.

That year, Eleanor wrote one of the first checks to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a radical civil rights organization that student activists had formed to sustain the momentum of the sit-in movement at Southern lunch counters to protest segregation. In 1961, President Kennedy appointed Eleanor as chair of a new Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Although Eleanor died the next year, just before the commission issued its final report, she had already played an important role in shaping the commission's work, which helped catalyze the modern feminist movement.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a bold progressive and, from the 1930s until her death, one of the most well-known and admired people in the United States and around the world. There is probably no person alive today - with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela - who commands that kind of respect. It is time for Hollywood to make a film about Eleanor, the radical Roosevelt.

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