

Introduction

Born into one of the oldest families in New York state, Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) grew up in a wealthy home, surrounded by politically active family members, not the least of whom was her uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt. Eleanor learned early the value of community service and believed that she had a duty to help those less fortunate than herself. Because of her upbringing, she naturally became involved in social causes as a young woman, and she remained active until marrying Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a distant cousin, in 1905. Eleanor's interest in social improvement remained high during the early years of her marriage but took a back seat to her husband and the rearing of their five children.

When polio confined Franklin to a wheel chair in 1921, Eleanor's public activity picked up once again. To maintain and strengthen her husband's political connections and to fight for their shared causes, Eleanor became her husband's legs. She traveled and spoke where he could not. The team proved a success, and Franklin won the governorship of New York, and in 1932 the presidency of the United States.

During Franklin's terms as president, Eleanor became the most active First Lady in American history. Her position provided her with the opportunity to become deeply involved in issues long close to her heart, ranging from women's organizations and youth movements to consumer welfare and civil rights for minorities. Roosevelt's unofficial office also allowed her access to the national media to promote causes that only her husband could command. In 1933 she held the first press conference ever by a First Lady. Already an accomplished writer, she penned a nationally syndicated newspaper column called "My Day" and also conducted a radio program. All of this fit around her extensive traveling on the behalf of the president, who never regained the use of his legs.

Franklin's death in 1945 freed her from the necessity of watching her words for his political career. Roosevelt

became even more active in liberal and human rights causes. As a presidential widow, she remained a major national figure, easily attracting media attention. She was twice appointed U.S. delegate to the United Nations, serving a total of nine years. She became chairman of the Human Rights Commission and a leader of the Democratic Party's liberal wing during the 1950s. Eleanor Roosevelt worked tirelessly for greater human rights until her death in 1962.

All of this activity came at a price. During Franklin's administration, criticism was heaped upon her, and she became widely known derisively as "that woman." Eleanor deflected much of the criticism directed toward her husband and his policies. She was vilified as much as she was honored. The public's polarized opinion of the former First Lady continued until her death.

Eleanor Roosevelt's activities and public opinions made her a natural target for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Her chosen causes, especially her work with the young and support for minorities' civil rights, convinced many that she was radical, subversive, and perhaps un-American. Director Herbert Hoover shared the suspicions of much of the public. The FBI began to collect material on Eleanor immediately after Franklin Roosevelt's election. She was under continuous surveillance until her death.

This FBI file contains the usual letters, memorandum and newspapers clippings that the Bureau routinely collected on suspect citizens. There are also a great number of letters from citizens protesting Eleanor's activities and her newspaper columns. Many letters pleaded with Hoover to do something to stop "that woman." Some of the most interesting material is the correspondence between Roosevelt and Hoover. The organization of this file is chronological. Its contents will interest scholars and students in a number of fields of history, including but not limited to twentieth-century U.S., social, women's, radical, and civil rights.

The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under

the Freedom of Information Act; certain documents or portion of documents have been deleted by the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation. The material has been filmed in the exact order and condition in which it was released, and every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

This file is in approximate chronological order, and the FBI did not index documents. The Roll Notes is not a complete inventory of the file; however, it gives an indication of the types of material or specific documents that may be particularly worthwhile for research.

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