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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

"Mrs. Roosevelt Goes on Tour": Eleanor Roosevelt's Soft-Diplomacy during World War II / Baritono Raffaella. - STAMPA. - (2020), pp. 41-61. [10.1007/978-3-030-42315-5]

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/787380> since: 2024-05-25

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42315-5>

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“Mrs. Roosevelt Goes on Tour:” Eleanor Roosevelt’s Soft-Diplomacy during World War II

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In the autumn of 1942 Eleanor Roosevelt went on a three-week tour of Great Britain to find out how the British were facing up to the war effort and pay a visit to the American troops stationed there. That trip was followed in August-September 1943 by a visit to the Pacific front, and in 1944 one to the Caribbean to take stock of the American soldiers’ situation. This last zone was away from any key war front, but for that reason Franklin D. Roosevelt thought it crucial to pay attention to the American soldiery, to convey the message that the President had the general picture of American involvement well in mind and no-one should feel out on the fringe of the grand project proclaiming the values of democracy. The great interest of all of these journeys is not just that once again Eleanor Roosevelt was deviating from the traditional role of a first lady, but that they formed part of F.D. Roosevelt’s strategy for mapping out a new post-war order. Adopting that angle, this chapter focuses above all on the technically ‘non-official’ tours of Great Britain and the Pacific, and especially on the public debate they unleashed. Eleanor was tasked with upholding the basic principles of the war effort, presenting an image of the United States as ‘benevolent’ towards the allies and its own citizens who were sacrificing their lives in the name of liberty and democracy.

Eleanor’s task might be described as soft diplomacy, part of the public diplomacy strategy that the Roosevelt administration embarked on even before joining in the war.¹ Nicholas J. Cull has spoken of public diplomacy as the process whereby international agents try to pursue their foreign policy goals with an ear open to international public opinion, using the methods of listening, cultural diplomacy, international exchange and communications.² Just as occurred with domestic politics, however, so in international affairs Eleanor would not just play ‘the voice and ears’ of the President, but conveyed her own specific vision of democracy, the principles she thought should underlie the new international order, playing a critical role more akin to citizen diplomacy.

The first lady as a public diplomat

In October 1942, then, Eleanor Roosevelt set off on what would be a tour of England, Ireland and Scotland. The official reason was acceptance of Queen Elizabeth’s return invitation after the British royals’ 1939 stay with the Roosevelts at the White House and their private Hyde Park residence. But in view of Eleanor’s well-known commitment to women’s rights, the invitation also allowed for the first lady observing first-hand how British women were contributing to the war effort. The visit was organized by Lady Stella Reading who had founded the Women’s Voluntary Service in 1938, an organization Eleanor was keen to inspect for the model it might provide for American women. Stella

Reading was a long-time friend of Eleanor's and belonged to that network of friends and contacts that dated from the time Eleanor studied at Allenswood near London. Accompanied by her personal secretary Malvina 'Tommy' Thompson and by Oveta Culp Hobby, president of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the first lady was scheduled to inspect American troops stationed in England, as well as factories, naval bases, hospitals, schools, distribution centers, Red Cross offices, refugees, and military installations.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was firmly behind the tour, believing that Eleanor's stay would help cement the Anglo-American alliance which had been officialized by the Atlantic Charter, but was beginning to feel strained by differences of strategy between the US and Britain.³ In early October 1942, Wendell Willkie, Republican candidate for the 1940 elections and author of *One World*, completed his world tour, during which he had put his finger on some sore points: the indifference of the colonial authorities at the poverty and backwardness of the British dominions, and the reasons behind the anti-colonial movements.⁴ Churchill was not amused.⁵ Willkie also revealed the talks he had had with Molotov and Stalin, who had emphasized the tragic social and economic situation in the Soviet Union and shown their frustration at what they considered Roosevelt's broken promise – the opening of a second front. So, Eleanor had a job to do: as it has been observed, "Part of her task would be to use her personal warmth and diplomatic magic to fortify the Anglo-American alliance, encourage troop morale, and keep the United Nations together."⁶

Eleanor, however, had her own objectives; in particular she wanted to demonstrate to the president and American public opinion that security mobilization could be combined with participatory democracy. As I put later, in her capacity of assistant director of the Office of Civil Defense, Eleanor Roosevelt was convinced that military mobilization was an opportunity to spread New Deal reform efforts and revive civic spiritedness. Great Britain was showing how "home defense" could be the occasion to strengthen community bonds. In her column of January 1st, 1941, Eleanor wrote: "The rise in England of the sense of cooperation and fellowship between all groups of peoples who find themselves the victims of a common danger and are bound together by a common determination."⁷ A Matthew Dallek has pointed out, Great Britain became a model for American politicians and administrators and delegations were sent to London to study home defense planning⁸. Eleanor's correspondence with Lady Stella Reading had the same scope: to learn how to maintain civil morale, provide social services and involve volunteers in the effort. As Eleanor explained during his trip: "My real interest lay in the people, particularly the women, who were at work. I wanted to know the working conditions and the way they organized their lives"⁹.

In her autobiography, Eleanor recalled: “Naturally the British looked upon my visit as providing an opportunity to get that story told in the U.S.”¹⁰ The British set great store by a visit that would give American public opinion a more accurate picture of what the British population were going through; for at the time US polls showed that over half of those interviewed had no clear idea what the reason for the war was, some were lukewarm about fighting fascism (and more convinced about the war against Japan), while over 30% thought peace should be made with Germany if Hitler were removed from power.¹¹ As *The Times* put it: “We shall expect that the results of a searching though friendly observation of England at war will ultimately find their way to the President, whose insight into our affairs cannot be too penetrating for our desire.”¹² Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to the United States, said: “I think it will be of immense value your going over ... and you will have no difficulty in getting the kind of direct impression of typical people in their homes of which you spoke yesterday.”¹³

As hinted, although this was the first international mission Franklin had given his wife, the Great Britain tour followed on a series she had performed at home. Eleanor was supposed to be a ‘surrogate’, ‘the president’s eyes and ears’ Though unofficial, the visit was arranged through the War Minister and the Secretary of State and may be seen as a first example of institutionalizing the diplomatic role of the first lady; it would lead in the Seventies to a first lady’s first real diplomatic mission when Rosalynn Carter toured Latin America in 1977.¹⁴ Once again, Eleanor broke with the traditional pattern. She was the first First lady to fly across the Atlantic and brave the dangers of wartime. Though Edith Wilson had set a precedent in accompanying Woodrow Wilson to the Paris conference, it was the first time a first lady had crossed the Atlantic alone. The American and British press were quick to pick up on this. Said *The Times*: “In an age when the increasing complexity of administration tends more and more to shackle the President to his desk in Washington, she has not hesitated to break with an old usage and travel widely throughout the United States.” The first lady, it went on, “shares her husband’s devotion to great ideals” and hence on her arrival in England “the country will be eagerly thrown open to her – its camps, its workshops, and its bomb-scarred homes.”¹⁵ The *New York Times* listed the ‘firsts’ entailed by the journey, and continued: “departing from tradition is nothing new to this 58-year-old 5-foot-11 inch, 160-pound mother of six children, five of them living.” And yet “there can be no doubt, especially among her critics, that she is a potent force and that her trip to England, however ‘unofficial’ it may be labelled, will have important political connotations.”¹⁶ To the *Washington Post*, “As a personality she is almost as familiar to Britons as to us... As the First Lady doubtless realizes, moreover, at least part of British enthusiasm is due to her official position. Her visit, then, affords our ally across the sea an opportunity to express the friendship of the British for the American people”. However, “It is only right to point out to our British friends

that the usefulness of her visit lies not so much in the personal honors to be paid her as in the opportunity to get about the British Isles, to witness the war effort on the home front, and to visit American troops.”¹⁷ For his part Stephen T. Early, White House press secretary, alluded openly to the ambiguities of an “unofficial” tour: “When Mrs Roosevelt gets to England, within easy reach of the German bombers, the Commander in Chief will have ‘a wife and four sons in the service’, *The New York Times* reported Early as saying.¹⁸ And indeed, the ceremonial welcome Eleanor received in London was hardly that of a ‘private’ person, as the newsreels attest.¹⁹ All the honors were paid: the American ambassador John G. Winant who came to the airport to take her to London; an impressive welcome at Victoria Station by amongst others Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, General Dwight Eisenhower and Admiral Harold Stark commanding American forces in Europe, Stella Reading and leading politicians. The route to Buckingham Palace, where she would stay for several days, was lined by a cheering crowd “which, while not fully aware of the arrivals’ identities [no details of the tour had been announced for reasons of security, *author’s note*], were attracted by numbers of American and British flags.”²⁰ At a London County Council venue Eden later said his welcome went first to the first lady, then to the wife of a powerful nation’s President, and last but above all to Eleanor “for herself.”²¹ *The Times* leader-writer remarked how Eleanor had “also imposed herself on American public life as a personality in her own right.”²² Her years of exposure in public allowed her to tread this thin ice without putting a foot wrong to compromise the mission Franklin had given her, as when she observed that the welcome was naturally for her husband and what the United States was doing to support the British nation. At the same time, she paid tribute to the British public. “I think there are none of us who sense that spirit who cannot but feel humbled before the greatness that has made a people able to defend itself and able to carry on in spite of all difficulties and discouragement.”²³ Throughout her visit Eleanor was careful to prevent her words or gestures causing the American administration embarrassment; she was well aware of her own role in her government’s strategy of public diplomacy and soft power; and equally aware that the conservative opposition might make great political play with any high-profile excesses by the first lady. Roosevelt’s decision to send Eleanor to Great Britain first and then to the Pacific seemed to sum up the style of his public diplomacy. As Frank Costigliola has pointed out, the category of ‘emotional belief’ could be a useful tool to explore Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s wartime diplomacy. In fact, “FDR’s effectiveness as president and as keystone of the Grand Alliance depended on his personal alliances with dedicated, live-in aides who entertained him, translated his notions into pragmatic policy, and got results.”²⁴ Even if Costigliola seems to underestimate Eleanor Roosevelt’s role, she was part, in my view, of that emotional and personal alliances which molded his diplomacy and his political touch. With the battles she was fighting in her homeland and the international echoes they had raised, Eleanor was

the symbol of the values the war was being fought to uphold; her credibility was the result of years of campaigning; she belonged to the American elite educated in England, and could hence boast (and exploit) deep bonds, solidarity and a network of social, intellectual and political relations bound up with the transnational activism of women's movements in the Atlantic area.²⁵ She also knew how to play it simple and listen to the women and menfolk of the less wealthy classes, as she had learnt to do in the tough years of the economic crisis.²⁶ Roosevelt herself would admit as much during a BBC radio broadcast:

I realize that I am here as a symbol, a symbol representing an Ally whom the people of Great Britain are glad to have fighting with them, not only because we bring them material strength, but because the peoples of the two countries feel they are fighting for the same objectives - a world which shall be free from cruelty and greed and oppression - a world where men shall be free to worship God as they see fit, and to seek the development of their own personalities and their own happiness within the limits which safeguard the rights of other human beings to do the same.²⁷

Just as she had at home, and would do in the United Nations, Eleanor regarded her goal as listening and building up bonds of empathy. Her mission was to embody the will, objectives and principles that fueled American democracy, and at the same time 'open up' the American people to the world, to building 'bridges of dialogue'. To the women working in an English munitions factory she said: "I hope from what I have seen and learned over here that I can take something back to the United States which will make all of us work hard to make the war short and, at the same time, make us as a people work with you after the war, so that we may have a better chance for a permanent peace."²⁸ Rather than targeting British public opinion, her 'soft diplomacy' seemed chiefly designed for the American people; it conveyed values of community and social cohesion that a war context urgently needed, lest it end by breeding tension, prejudice and diffidence towards one's neighbor. Writing that year in *The New Republic*, she had made this clear when she raised the issue of racial discrimination towards Afro-Americans and citizens with a Japanese background: "perhaps the simplest way of facing the problem in the future is to say that we are fighting for freedom, and that one of the freedoms we must establish is freedom from discrimination among the peoples of the world, either because of race, or of color, or of religion."²⁹ The war should be an opportunity to strengthen community feeling and democratic participation: so much she had argued during her brief and unsuccessful stint at the Office of Civil Defense from which she had been forced to resign only that February. In the autumn of 1942 the women and men of Britain set an example for the American people: "It seemed to me as I walked through the brick compartments of that shelter that I learned something about fear, and the resistance to total destruction which exists in all human beings. How could people be herded together like this,

night after night without some epidemic being the result and yet it was done and the spirits of kindness and cheerfulness pervaded, and those who had lost so much still managed to smile.”³⁰ The spirit of the British people needed transmitting to American citizens, as she told Eden:

I like to think ... that in the months to come many of our young people will know more of the British people than ever before ... I feel ... that the growing understanding between us will perhaps mean more to the future than we can now know ... It may mean that we will use our combined strength to help the world as a whole and that we need not know a period such as this again.”³¹

Eleanor’s mission to England, Scotland and Ireland was a clear success as the press noted, and as we glean from her letters to her husband. Eden, King George VI and the Queen Mother, as well as Stella Reading and Clementine Churchill, all voiced their appreciation of Eleanor’s trip. Even Churchill, whose cordial relations with Eleanor were tempered by their difference on the question of empire, wrote to Franklin: “I thought you would like to know that Mrs. Roosevelt’s visit here is a great success. She has been very happy about it herself.”³² And in a note to Eleanor he declared: “You certainly have left golden footprints behind you.”³³ Chalmers Roberts from the Office of War Information who escorted Eleanor Roosevelt on her tour, would later tell the President that “Mrs. Roosevelt has done more to bring real understanding of the spirit of the United States to the people of Great Britain than any other single American who has ever visited these islands.”³⁴ Franklin, too, wrote to Ambassador Winant: “I think she is having a thoroughly successful visit and from this end her publicity has been extraordinary good, especially considering the fact that we are in the last week of a campaign which I wish to heavens was over.”³⁵ Even months afterwards, King George VI wrote to Franklin Delano Roosevelt “The efforts of our two countries, whether separate or combined, have already shown to the world that we are determined to destroy the enemies of civilization ... The Queen and I were so delighted to entertain Mrs. Roosevelt here last October, and we hope that she returned to you none the worse for her strenuous visit.”³⁶

It was probably the success of the British visit that decided President Roosevelt in favor of another goodwill tour, this time to the Pacific front in Australia and New Zealand, scheduled for late August through September 1943. In “My Day,” Eleanor claimed her purpose was to see “the work that the women are doing ... This, too, I think will be of interest to other women all over the world.” She went on: “I hope that our soldiers, sailors and marines, wherever I see them, will know how much I appreciate this opportunity to bring them a greeting from their Commander in Chief, and how deeply interested I am in them and their achievements.”³⁷

Yet the political implications were obvious, both as concerned the situation of the American soldiers and as a way of reasserting American ties with Britain and the Commonwealth countries.

The journey was one of her longest – some 6,500 miles – and also most taxing emotionally and physically in view of the climate, discomfort and dangers.

Part of it was kept secret, as in the case of her visit to the American soldiers at the Guadalcanal base, which she herself set great store by. She had met many soldiers wounded from Guadalcanal and the Pacific arena in hospitals on the west coast. As she recalled later: “At once I put up a strong plea to be allowed to see our men on Guadalcanal and other islands. ... I told my husband that it would be hard to go on doing it if, when I was to be in the Pacific area anyway, I were not permitted to visit the places where these men had left their health or received their injuries.”³⁸

Eleanor wrote that she could not remember when her husband first suggested it would be a good idea to tour the Pacific. His aim, of course, was to send a message of support to foster patriotic cohesion. “He felt,” wrote Eleanor, “that Australia and New Zealand, being so far away, had been neglected in the matter of visitors. Both countries were exposed to attack and the people were under constant strain and anxiety.”³⁹ Yet his decision came up against opposition and resistance from officials in the armed forces who saw the trip as interfering with their operations. Franklin knew this. In a letter sent on 15 August 1943 to General MacArthur, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and other officers serving in the Pacific, Franklin wrote: “She is, of course, anxious to see everything, but I leave it wholly to your discretion as to where she should go and where she should not go. ... Also, I would not have you let her go to any place which would interfere in any way with current military or naval operations – in other words, the war comes first.” However, Roosevelt went on, “I think that Mrs Roosevelt’s visit to places where we have military or naval personnel will help the general morale, because Mrs. Roosevelt has been visiting and will continue to visit the various hospitals in this country, especially on the West Coast where she meets returning sick or wounded personnel from the Southwest Pacific.”⁴⁰ For the first time Eleanor would not be accompanied by her secretary Malvina Thompson, so as to avoid the criticisms of the previous year “by taking up as little room as possible.”⁴¹ On her arrival, Air Transport Command assigned her Major George Durno.⁴² MacArthur himself refused to host her in New Guinea since, as Eleanor quipped to a friend, “it would require too many high-ranking officers to escort me.”⁴³ Her letter to Franklin voiced greater irritation at the obstacles preventing her from getting a real sense of the situation: “The papers here complain that I see none of the plain people. Neither do I really see any of the plain soldiers. I have an MP escort everywhere that would do you credit. I have all the pomp & restriction & none of the power! I’m coming home this time & go in a factory!”⁴⁴

Once again, the Republican opposition queried the utility of the mission, the problems of security and the wisdom of spending public money on a trip by a ‘private’ person. The criticisms tended to have an ulterior purpose: getting at Eleanor was a way of attacking the President. On her

tour of Great Britain one of the harshest critics, Westbrook Pegler, went so far as to suspect collusion with the socialists and communists whose aim was to overthrow the American system. The charge verged on the absurd, and indeed there were those who hinted that Pegler was “an unfortunate man who finds himself with a keen style and no mind to match it.”⁴⁵ Again, in his decision Franklin had to bear in mind the complaints about the first lady that summer when race riots broke out at Detroit and other American cities over the racial integration policies she was so keen on. The conservative press had accused her of having “blood on your hands ... More than any other person, you are morally responsible for those race riots in Detroit where two dozen were killed.”⁴⁶

Eleanor thus started out amid doubt and anxiety: “This trip will be attacked as a political gesture, & I am so uncertain whether or not I am doing the right thing that I will start with a heavy heart.”⁴⁷ To counter the opposition Eleanor took Red Cross president Norman Davis’ advice and travelled at her own expense as a “special envoy” of the Red Cross wearing an association uniform: “I hoped in this way to show that I was doing a serious job and not just running around the war area causing trouble.”⁴⁸

But it was hard for Eleanor to pass for a private person. Both in Australia and in New Zealand the political and military authorities paid her the honors due to a political personage, however much she might claim “she was here in a good will capacity and would prefer to visit troop concentrations and hospitals and meet women engaged in war activities rather than attend social functions.”⁴⁹ At Canberra she was hosted by the Commonwealth Government, with a welcome from Governor General Gowie and wife, as well as Prime Minister John Curtin. She was then received by the Australian parliament, “the second American to be accorded that honor” after General Douglas MacArthur.⁵⁰ As the press put it, “Australia is not accustomed to visits from world potentates – or in this case a potentatess – so this contact with the wife of the United States President was an epoch-making event for this country.”⁵¹ In her speeches, as we will be pointing out later, Eleanor could hardly not touch on political issues to do with the future world order: “Wherever Mrs Roosevelt spoke ... she emphasized three things in particular – the need for orientation in economic and social thinking, the necessity for the people themselves to work and sacrifice for peace, and the belief that women have as great a part in molding the future as men.” Above all, “she speaks ... in international language, crystallizing hopes for the future, whether they be American, Australian, British or others ... If the United States had wanted to send a good-will ambassador to this country, no better choice could have been made, unless it had been the President himself.”⁵²

During her stay in the Pacific she visited all the places where the Red Cross was at work, sending detailed reports to Norman Davis and the President about the conditions for soldiers in hospital as well as their life in barracks. To Franklin she wrote: “Tell Dr. MacIntire his hospitals are

tops – not for publication, they are better than the army. The Red [Cross] is doing a swell job but needs more personnel badly & they must work out a better basis for cooperation with the Navy & Marine Corps.”⁵³ Despite the obstacles raised by military command, her tour of the barracks and hospitals ended up being another act of public diplomacy in public opinion throughout Australia, New Zealand and various Pacific islands, as well as with American opinion at home. The area was not without logistical problems and tough living conditions; consensus was also an issue, and the need to underscore the reasons for the war seemed still more urgent. As Eleanor wrote to Lorena Hickok, “These boys break your heart, but they're so young & so tired. Malaria is almost as bad as bullets. They are hardly out of the hospitals before they are at Red Cross Clubs & dances & they laugh at everything. I take my hat off to this young generation & I hope we don't let them down.”⁵⁴

While her strategy in Britain had been to play up her image as first lady and working woman, activist rather than mother or wife, the key to her success in the Pacific was the reverse: playing the “supportive mother” persuaded even the military authorities to change their view of the merits of her mission. Eleanor was “the most recognizable woman in the United States ... she transcended her public persona and provided a genuine human connection for thousands of young Americans.”⁵⁵ That fact eventually registered in the Pacific war zone. Admiral Halsey claimed that “she alone had accomplished more good than any other person.”⁵⁶ She visited the wounded American soldiery ward by ward, and as in England was prepared to voice any public or private appeals or requests made by the soldiers. Just as in the American depression, her tour made her a public figure, the symbol of a benevolent America, of a President mindful of his people. In her memoirs she confessed that, with all the red tape shrouding her visits, whenever she went to a hospital, she was afraid she might disappoint the soldiers who may have been expecting a beauty queen. Yet when she appeared, those soldiers greeted her with “Gosh, there’s Eleanor,” showing they recognized her empathy and familiar touch; for all the respect due to a leader, she broke through the barriers and set up a virtuous circle.⁵⁷ Major George Durno commented: “She did a magnificent job, saying the right thing at the right time and doing 101 little things that endeared her to the people.”⁵⁸

From public diplomat to citizen diplomat

Once again, though, Eleanor Roosevelt did not confine herself to the role of President’s surrogate or even public diplomat. A few years back in 1939, *Time Magazine*’s April 17 issue featuring the first lady on the front cover printed an article entitled “Where is foreign policy made?,” referring to the Roosevelts’ meeting with the British royals.⁵⁹ The article compared two powerful women – the Queen and Eleanor – the difference being that the first lady’s power lay not so much in her influence over her powerful husband, as in her direct influence on public opinion.⁶⁰ Her growing involvement in

international questions was not just a matter of historical contingency, but stemmed from a long-term interest in the issues of peace and peaceful settlement of conflict, dating from the First World War.⁶¹

But the rise of Nazism and its systemic threat brought a change to her beliefs: the conviction that use of force was inevitable. In a 1939 press conference she even claimed she had never been a “radical” pacifist, but perhaps a realistic pacifist.⁶² When her *This Troubled World* came out the year before, it provided further evidence that she could stand as a key figure in that “multilateral internationalism,” advocated by Clark Eichelberger, of the League of Nations Association and his committee, the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace directed by James T. Shotwell.⁶³ Eleanor collaborated with Eichelberger and Shotwell, and became a benchmark figure in that public-private network handling relations between the American government and private organizations. Roosevelt approved of it, and saw the network as a useful way of sounding public opinion, above all when the idea of the United Nations began to take shape.⁶⁴ Eichelberger in particular viewed the civil organizations as an essential part of democratic society: not only were there tasks an organization might carry out, there were some objectives that *only* such organizations could pursue.⁶⁵ Since the First World War, within female pacifism a form of activism had been emerging which might be called ‘citizen’s diplomacy’: the power of the individual’s pressure to persuade a government to take the diplomatic initiative towards settling crises and conflict.⁶⁶ The ambition of associations and civic groups to play a part that counted in planning the post-war scenario found Eleanor Roosevelt in full sympathy.

The tours of Britain and the Pacific gave Eleanor an opportunity to pursue her goals of reconstructing an international democratic area which could only happen if the domestic and foreign political orders welded together. She believed that only international democracy could ensure and bolster democracy within the United States, and only a strong inclusive American democracy could provide a guarantee that such an order would endure. At the time of FD Roosevelt’s speech on the four freedoms in 1941, Eleanor had written:

America is not a pile of goods, more luxury, more comforts, a better telephone system, a greater number of cars. America is a dream of greater justice and opportunity for the average man and, if we can not obtain it, all our other achievements amount to nothing... Devotion to democracy, devotion to liberty, what we call patriotism, depends upon the realization of such conditions in our country as really give us the opportunity and hope for future dreams.⁶⁷

In both her tours of Great Britain and the Pacific she saw that ideal democracy would only come about by the commitment of individuals, men and women. Winding up a radio broadcast in Liverpool, she stated that “we failed before because we could not think on international lines... the peoples of

the world left their business in the hands of self-seekers who thought of themselves and their temporary gains, but now and in the future you the women and the youth of all the United Nations will have to awaken and accept full responsibility.⁶⁸ At Canberra on 4 September 1943 Eleanor emphasized again the idea of an active citizen body as the only way of building a peaceful democratic world:

Then, we shall have to win a peace. Last time, we lost the peace. Perhaps my nation was partly to blame. ... I do not think that leaders alone can do what is required, without the people understanding what are the objectives at which they are aiming, and willingly cooperating with their leaders. ... This, I believe, is the great test which lies before democracy – whether individuals can forget themselves sufficiently to think of the good of the world as a whole and, through their constant activity as citizens, ensure that their governments will truly represent them.⁶⁹

Three days later she spoke in Sydney, reiterating the cornerstones of the new order, based on the values outlined in the Atlantic Charter and the speech on the four liberties.⁷⁰ They were in danger of becoming empty values, she said, if they weren't supported by a collective effort and participation by every man and every woman, regardless of social class, age or education. Her vision of the new world order rested, inevitably, on surmounting the barriers that hamstrung democracy in the United States and elsewhere: above all, discrimination of gender and race.

The central topics of her domestic politics were the focus of her attention and spirit of observation abroad: first and foremost, the crucial role of work and the commitment of women of all ages and all conditions. In Great Britain women's work in offices, factories and traditionally masculine jobs in wartime industry was not just a key part of civil society's response to the emergency of war, but was fast becoming the fulcrum of Britain's capacity for drawing out the community capacity for reconstruction. Praising women's responsible stand in coping with all sides of social living had various implications in Eleanor's view of things: the need for women's contribution to be recognized, confirming their full citizenship; women's liberty as the litmus test for all of society's degree of freedom and acknowledgment that women's work enjoyed equal status with men's sacrifice in war.

Taking stock of the rubble, the dead and the injured that made daily life such a struggle, Eleanor admitted she had learnt about fear, but also about the resources required to hold out against total destruction. That was the most important lesson to emerge. It was summed up by a woman she met who said "We have all accepted the fact that we may be destroyed at any moment, so danger has no meaning to us."⁷¹ The organization required in creating crèches for working women, providing ongoing education, and having women working side by side with men in the armed forces, industry,

hospitals, schools, voluntary civic defense or organizations like the Red Cross bore witness to an ability to build a sense of community amid the rubble. That, in her view, was the very basis of democracy:

The women of Britain are helping to win the war, in fact they are a very vital factor in the man power of the nation and they know also that they will be a very vital factor in making the peace and in carrying on the crusade which will certainly have to be carried on in the future. Women may have had a feeling in the past that they did not have an equal responsibility with men in world affairs. The women of the future can not have that feeling because the writing on the wall is clear that if there is to be peace in the world, women as well as men will have to decide to work and sacrifice to achieve it.⁷²

Eleanor believed that the future of peace could only depend on action by women, “a very potent factor in working out the necessary changes in existing economic systems as well as changes in social conditions which alone can bring real freedom to the people of the world.”⁷³ What also emerged, she felt was an enormous capacity for social cohesion and solidarity that challenged the image of a classist society, a place where social mobility seemed alien to social dynamics.⁷⁴ Just before setting off for Britain, she had accompanied Franklin to Detroit on a tour of the Chrysler and Ford factories where she admired the presence of women on the assembly lines. Her analysis of the British situation where women took an active public, not just private role, wove in with an ambition that she nursed at home: to promote female employment also in the industries geared to wartime mobilization, thus acknowledging their integral role in the community.

Another reason why what she saw in Britain was so significant was that it came hard on the heels of a crushing defeat she herself had just suffered. As I mentioned before, the year before, on 22 September 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt had appointed her Assistant Director of the new Office of Civilian Defense directed by Fiorello La Guardia – an official post though not remunerated, as a sop to controversy over her nomination. The job of the Office was to set up programs of civil defense and projects for mobilizing the people. Eleanor and the Mayor had a similar vision of democracy in terms of enlargement of social policies and expansion of social justice⁷⁵. However, while Eleanor considered the military mobilization as the occasion to spread New Deal reform efforts, La Guardia was primarily concerned with security efforts.

Eleanor resigned on 20 February 1942 after a spate of accusations that she had favored friends and groups connected with the communist movement. But her resignation also sprang from incomprehension and conflicting views by those who saw the Office as solely designed to mobilize war resources and those, like Eleanor, who considered it an opportunity to re-knit the social fabric, encourage democratic participation, which is precisely what seemed to be the case in Britain and in

the Pacific. To quote Matthew Dallek, “For Eleanor Roosevelt, the war was a fight to secure a better postwar future, which meant an expanded New Deal updated to meet wartime social needs [...] In the battle for hearts around the globe, American democracy [...] had to show that it was a superior system of government over fascism.”⁷⁶

In Australia and New Zealand, just as Britain, women had shouldered an equal share of responsibility – perforce, but also through choice and the opportunity to throw off the shackles that had kept them on the fringe in the past.⁷⁷ It was not the first time this had happened, though never on such a wide scale. Eleanor was confident, therefore, that if women were to work for peace the way they had worked in wartime, there might be real hope of a “second chance”, a second possibility of winning the peace.⁷⁸

Active Citizenship

Eleanor Roosevelt had argued tirelessly since the 1930s and then again in her 1940 *The Moral Basis of Democracy* that democracy could only be based on active citizenship, which was inclusive and meant the respect of all differences. Both as a public diplomat and as a citizen diplomat, Eleanor knew full well that the issues she would be addressing on the British and Pacific tours were heavily charged with contradiction due to the color line inside and outside the United States. But even in the realm of public diplomacy the new Office of War Information would soon realize that winning “the world war” would mean taking a stand on the issue of racial discrimination as used by Germany and Japan propaganda.⁷⁹ Before leaving for the Pacific front Eleanor argued: “We can make up our minds that we will work with any other human being who does his daily work beside us and that we will not inquire as to his race or religion, only as to whether he is doing an honest job.”⁸⁰ Her commitment to the campaign to end racial discrimination – criticized by some as being too moderate – had to reckon, in the international even more than the domestic arena, with her role as a public diplomat: informal, no doubt, but it forced her to avoid words and gestures that might damage the administration. The same attitude of *realpolitik* would distinguish her involvement as a US delegate to the United Nations.⁸¹

The tensions that the racial and anti-colonial issues raised both in the social fabric of America and in the alliance with Great Britain could thus not transpire directly from Eleanor’s public words, yet they heavily affected her drive to use her power in terms of citizen’s diplomacy. While her public speeches and writings looked jubilantly towards a united victory of the USA, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, China and the Commonwealth countries, her personal position was much more critical and not always in harmony with her husband’s.⁸² One of the unspecified reasons for her visit to Britain was the tension arising between American and British soldiers over racial segregation in the American

army. The tricky subject of relations between black and white soldiers in Britain, as well as the need for care in proportioning the respective contingents for service across the Atlantic, emerged from the correspondence between ambassador Winant and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.⁸³ The white soldiers from the southern states, for example, were dismayed that English or Irish or Scottish girls were not repelled by Afro-American soldiers, while racial tension among American soldiers caused conflict even with the British civilian population.

Knowing of Eleanor's pro-Afro-American sentiments, the Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson put pressure on the President to muzzle the first lady on racial questions. Eleanor retorted to Stimson that "we will have to do a little educating among our Southern white men and officers."⁸⁴ Convinced that racism might cause conflict with the British, both General Eisenhower and Ambassador Winant sought the remedy of setting up a British-American Liaison Board to handle racial disputes. For her part, while bowing to the need for public silence, Eleanor sent regular letters to the President, Stimson and General Marshall pointing out forms of discrimination, the use of black soldiers for menial duties alone, whatever their training or education.⁸⁵ Nor did she fail to acknowledge the black soldiers. At Bristol, for example, "Mrs Roosevelt chatted with several Negro soldiers, who beamed delightedly when the First Lady spoke to them." During that meeting the first lady was told that "men find the people here very hospitable and very anxious to make them happy."⁸⁶ News of the kind naturally raised eyebrows in the more conservative circles.

It was not only America's internal racial problems but tensions over the incipient movement for colonial liberation which, as we hinted, caused strain in the Atlantic alliance. Here again, Eleanor was in an ambiguous position. One instance was when she declined to meet the leader of the Indian League in London and representatives of Indian anti-colonial movements, her reason being to avoid compromising relations between the American and British governments. But indirectly she did pay attention to what was going on and gather all the wherewithal to understand the dynamics afoot in the Empire.⁸⁷ After Pearl Harbor Eleanor had been sure that the end of white supremacy was "*the* theme" of international relations. On this she thought she had Franklin's support: he said he believed it necessary to grant India dominion status, just as the rights of Afro-Americans should be extended in the United States. For one could hardly fight Hitler's Aryan theories and meanwhile justify racial segregation and colonial dominion. To Eleanor the theme was not one that could be ducked. A few days after Pearl Harbor she had received a letter from the famous writer and Asian expert Pearl Buck who wrote: "More basic than China's antagonism to Japan, ... is the colored race's antagonism to the white."⁸⁸

The race issue also came up on the Pacific tour, though the situation appeared more nuanced. In New Zealand Eleanor was received by the Maori minority. She agreed to be welcomed in their

own culture's way, her simplicity and affability winning their enthusiasm.⁸⁹ But at home her gesture was much criticized: the southern press commented on the photos of her Maori welcome that it confirmed their belief that the first lady had "niggerloving propensities" or, worse, that "she is stirring up racial prejudice," as a Gallup poll indicated.⁹⁰ What she saw in some areas of the Pacific persuaded her that, if not different, then at least non-conflictual racial relations might be achieved. After a visit to the American soldiers stationed on Christmas Island, she wrote: "There seems to be no trouble anywhere out here between the white and colored. They lie in beds in the same wards, go to the same movies and sit side by side and work side by side, but I don't think I've seen them mess together, but their food is as good and everything just as clean in their quarters."⁹¹

Though she could not speak out publicly as a public diplomat, Eleanor did not refrain from acting as a 'citizen diplomat'. She put pressure on the President, the Secretary of War, the high command of the armed forces and members of the Democratic Party who were closer to her, to get them to use influence, put forward draft bills and try to introduce new ways of managing race relations. On her long flight home from the Pacific she wrote a series of reports to submit to the President and politicians in Congress, especially as concerned the soldiers' position when the war was over. She was afraid that when the fighting stopped, the veterans would be left to their fate, causing the same sort of resentment experienced in the years of the economic crisis. She probably remembered her first act as first lady when, accompanied only by Roosevelt's spin doctor Louis Howe, she visited the war veterans' camp at Washington where they were indignant at being let down by President Hoover.⁹² She made recommendations: to the trade unionist Walter Reuther to form a Peace Production Board; to Franklin that he take fiscal steps to ensure that the war industries reconverting to peacetime guaranteed employment; and to members of the Democratic Party that they propose a bill to make sure the veterans received job training courses and the right to education – what would be a GI Bill.⁹³

On top of this, she felt alarm at the inhuman conditions she had witnessed in the Pacific which were multiplying the cases of soldiers with post-trauma syndrome. In her diary she wrote: "Hospitals and cemeteries are closely tied together in my head and heart on this trip and I think of them even when I talk to the boys who are well and strong and in training."⁹⁴ She told the press she was worried about the post-war reconstruction, especially the need to reckon with veterans who had been maimed or had grave psychological conditions. On that score she thought legislation in Australia and New Zealand decidedly more advanced than in America: "the boys asked me what my husband's proposals were regarding education and post-war jobs."⁹⁵ Franklin urged the war minister and armed forces high command to review their policies: "I know that the Army and Navy are doing the best they can

with the subject of fatigue and stress ... but I wish that further special consideration be given in all combat services.”⁹⁶

Eleanor’s capacity to act as a citizen diplomat would be put to the test on the issue of constructing the new international order. Her efforts to create and consolidate domestic and foreign consensus on setting up a United Nations, and to develop an internationalist spirit able to cope with the new emerging realities, would come up against serious obstacles. Her travels had convinced her that a democratic international order must be based on tools of dialogue and listening, respect for differences and elimination of gender and racial contradictions, while the colonial question could no longer be shelved. But however powerful her voice, it clashed with the needs of domestic and international politics. On all the issues she was most wedded to – refugees, African-American citizenship, women’s rights, the search for dialogue with anti-colonial movements – Eleanor had to battle with resistance at home and abroad. Above all when she raised the problem of racial equality, as she had tried in Britain, the efficacy of soft-diplomacy revealed its limits: ambivalence due to the difficulty of reconciling beliefs with political constraints, which inevitably curbed action and autonomy. Despite all, she would never stop trying.

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