

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn in for her first term as President of the United States. Roosevelt was elected to serve four terms in office, the longest of any American president. The role of his wife, Eleanor, in the White House and her later involvement in media and politics, helped shape the country. She has affected the role of all subsequent first ladies of the United States. Let's take a look at the influential life of Eleanor Roosevelt.

### Early Life and Education

The niece of President Theodore Roosevelt, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 into a wealthy family in New York City. Both of her parents died by the time she was 10 years old. Eleanor was sent to live with her grandmother, who was active in New York society life. In 1898, Eleanor attended school at Allenswood Girl's Academy in London. There she came under the tutelage of Marie Souvestre, who ran the school. Souvestre took an active interest in Eleanor's education. She took Eleanor as a traveling companion around Europe and taught her about the world of working-class issues.

Eleanor returned to New York when she was 18 and immersed herself in the policies of the Progressive Era. She taught dance and physical exercise at a settlement house on Rivington street. She also did some volunteer work for the National Consumer League, which wanted better working conditions, especially for women and children.

### Marriage and Politics

Eleanor Roosevelt met her husband Franklin D. Roosevelt—or FDR—on a train. The two had already known of each other, long before they became a couple. They were distant cousins and even shared the same last name. When the two married in 1905, Eleanor's uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt, walked her down the aisle. Eleanor and FDR had six children together.

Eleanor did not want to give up the life she had been leading prior to marriage. She supported her husband's run for New York State Senate while heightening her own involvement in political culture. As her husband rose through the political ranks in government, she was responsible for handling the social obligations expected of political wives had at the time, such as making social calls on other women and touring hospitals and schools.



Eleanor Roosevelt served as First Lady from 1933 to 1945. Inspired by her education in London, she campaigned for worker's rights. She was the first First Lady to be a union member.

During World War I, FDR was made the Assistant Navy Secretary, and they moved from New York to Washington, DC. There, Eleanor volunteered for the Red Cross and Navy Relief Society, helping to work for better treatment of mentally ill patients.

Eleanor and FDR had several rocky years, including his diagnosis of polio in 1921. Although FDR was partially paralyzed, Eleanor convinced him to remain in politics and supported his return to the New York Senate when he was healthy again. While he recovered, she revitalized her political activity and became active in the Women's Trade Union League and the League of Women Voters. She also helped found a furniture factory called Val-Kill Industries, which provided work for farmers who needed supplemental income. She also taught at Todhunter School in New York City.

### First Lady Redefined

In 1933, FDR was inaugurated as the 32nd president of the United States. He and Eleanor moved into the White House during the height of the Great Depression. Worried that being First Lady would take her away from her own interests, Eleanor decided to break away from the traditional role of First Lady.

Eleanor used status as First Lady to attempt to influence change in American society. She became the first First Lady to hold her own press conferences, independently of the president. Because Eleanor wanted to see women earn more job opportunities, her press conferences were open to female news correspondents only. As Eleanor began to become an important political figure, the White House began shuttling news and information through her press conferences. They believed news from the White House would be received better by the American people coming from the First Lady than from the president. During her 12 years living and working in the White House, Eleanor also wrote newspaper and magazine columns, ran radio shows, lectured on various topics, and even wrote books.

During FDR's New Deal, Eleanor traveled the country to inspect New Deal programs to see how they were working. She helped form the National Youth Administration in 1935, which set up grants for students to attend school while



Eleanor Roosevelt participated in radio programs to educate America on government reforms. Her activity in radio and writing for magazines brought attention to the media outlets of the White House.

working part time. She also backed the Works Progress Administration, which worked to jump-start the depressed economy through work relief by investing in roads, bridges, and public parks. She advocated for women's inclusion in the program, and she was also very dedicated to promoting the arts. With her help, government funding helped support the preservation of folklore, songs, and writing of America.

### **The Wartime First Lady**

When World War II broke out, the First Lady placed the White House on the same rationing system as the rest of the country, limiting the amount of goods the White House could use. She planted a Victory Garden on the White House lawn and spoke out against the Nazi leaders. Now a recognized independent voice from her husband, she was confident in her opinions. She even criticized her husband's decision to tear down temporary housing, believing that these buildings could be reused as schools or public buildings.. Not all Americans supported Eleanor's active role as First Lady. Some were concerned that she overstepped her boundaries because she was not an elected official.

In spite of this criticism, throughout her time as First Lady, Eleanor enjoyed the love and respect of the American people. During World War II, all four of Eleanor's sons were on active duty in the military, making her experience similar to that of millions of American wartime mothers. The American people saw her family's dedication to the country. When FDR died in 1945, the country grieved with Eleanor. Now that Eleanor was finished with her role as First Lady, she claimed she was finished with politics. However, in December of that year she accepted President Truman's nomination to serve as a delegate to the newly formed United Nations.

### **After the White House**

Even though she never ran for public office, Eleanor Roosevelt participated in politics for the rest of her life. She remained in the United Nations until 1952 and attended Democratic conventions. When President John F. Kennedy was elected president, she was reappointed as a delegate to the United Nations. She also served on the Peace Corps Advisory Board and was chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

Eleanor Roosevelt never remarried after her husband's death, although she had many friends. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis in her later years and died in 1962 at the age of 78. She is remembered for her half century of dedication to public work.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** How is this reading passage structured?
  - A.** cause and effect
  - B.** compare/contrast
  - C.** chronological order
  - D.** order of importance
  
- 2.** After completing school in London, what Progressive cause did Eleanor work with?
  - A.** prohibition
  - B.** settlement house
  - C.** voting rights for women
  - D.** the abolition of indentured servitude
  
- 3.** What action most likely made people concerned that Eleanor Roosevelt was overstepping her boundaries as First Lady?
  - A.** scheduling and holding her own press conferences
  - B.** visiting New Deal programs established by her husband
  - C.** advocating for cultural preservation of music and writing
  - D.** war rationing the White House just like the rest of America
  
- 4.** In what ways did Eleanor Roosevelt's early education prepare her for a career in politics? Use examples from the passage to support your answer.