



REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LADY: THE ANNIVERSARY OF ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

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It is usually said that “behind every great man is a great woman.” Without any doubt, one of the best exponents of this proverb is the Roosevelt “marriage.” I write “marriage” between semicolons as, in its literal meaning, as the Roosevelts were bound to a legally accepted relationship between two people. Yet, the reality was quite different: the romance between Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and his secretary Lucy Mercer left little space in his heart for his wife Eleanor. It was nothing but political pressure that led Franklin and Eleanor to continue with that sham, as a divorce would have precipitated the political downfall of Franklin. However, it was the continuity of this marriage that allowed Eleanor to ultimately become one of the most influential First Ladies in the history of the United States—thorough and even after Franklin’s presidency. In her 136th anniversary, we celebrate the birth of the woman who reshaped the role of the First Lady.

At first glance, when we think about a presidential dishonest marriage, like the one the Roosevelts had, the Clintons usually come around. In fact, many similarities can be drawn between Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Rodman Clinton. Both of them were bound to a dishonest marriage, and both of them knew how to make the most out of it as First Ladies in order not to remain in the shadow of their husband by boosting their individual careers through their vigorous energy and fortitude. Yet, contrary to Bill Clinton, Franklin D. Roosevelt knew how to keep his private affairs away from the public eye as successfully as he managed to dissimulate the paralysis from the waist down due to the polio, illness he contracted at the age of 39. It will be from this episode that Eleanor’s influence over Franklin will be decisive in his later return to politics, leading her husband in a wheelchair from a deep depression to the Presidency of the United States in 1932. This critical period, not



only in FDR's life, but also in Eleanor's, has been portrayed in the HBO movie *Warm Springs* (2005).

Warm Springs takes inspiration from the health resort Warm Springs, in Georgia, where Franklin D. Roosevelt (Kenneth Branagh) hoped to regain, in its miraculous waters, the mobility of his legs without success. Yet, the film also deals with a spiteful Eleanor Roosevelt (Cynthia Nixon) after she finds out Franklin's romance with his secretary, Lucy Mercer (Melissa Ponzio). Despite being eager to file for divorce, Eleanor is forced to remain in the marriage, as a potential separation would weaken Franklin's promising political career. However, soon after Franklin contracts the polio after a promotional visit to the Boy Scouts, leaving him in a wheelchair and consequently undermining his meteoric career.

Sink in the depths of a depression, the Roosevelts look for a miracle in Warm Springs. Soon, Franklin loses all hope due to his inability of even standing in the water. He feels like he is a burden and tells Eleanor to abandon him. However, Eleanor did the opposite: she began serving as a stand-in for her incapacitated husband, making public appearances on his behalf under the firm belief that, sooner or after, her husband would return to politics. While she crossed the country giving conferences on her husband's behalf, Franklin went through a series of events in Georgia that led him to acquire Warm Springs under the belief that, through hard work, he would regain mobility of his legs. Yet, his hopes soon faded due to a medical report. Depressed and with no desire to go on, it was nobody but Eleanor who convinced him to return to politics. His long stay in Warm Springs, as homonymous film depicts, would end in 1928, the year in which he successfully ran for Governor of New York.

While *Warm Springs* ends with FDR's return to politics, Franklin's successful life in politics had only just began. After being elected as Governor of New York in 1928, he became President of the United States four years later. His successful management of the country through the dark years of the Great Depression paved the ways for four more years in 1936. Even if he should have ended his Presidency after two terms—it was a tradition but not the law—U.S. entrance into World War II required political stability in the country, precipitating his third and fourth terms in 1940 and 1944 respectively. Yet, he didn't end his fourth term, as he passed away in 1945.

All throughout these years, Eleanor Roosevelt was not willing to remain in the shadow of her husband. Witnessing with sadness and regret that all previous First Ladies had traditionally assume a passive role, basically being restricted to a domestic life and hostessing, Eleanor was determined to redefine that role. Consequently, Eleanor continued with the active business she had before Franklin returned to politics. She was the first wife of a President to hold regular press



conferences, to daily write articles in newspapers and monthly in magazines, to host a weekly radio show, to speak in a national party convention, and even to disagree with some political decisions of her husband. Also, from the institutional level, she became the main connection between the White House and the Afro-American population in an era defined by a deep segregation and inequality at getting financial support under the 'New Deal' promoted by Franklin Delano. She was also criticised for her fierce defence of the rights of the Japanese-American population by opposing her husband's Executive Order 9066, which required these people in many areas of the U.S. to enter internment camps.

Eleanor's influence over American society was such that, after FDR's death in 1945, her work continued to be of a great influence. In December of that year, the new President Harry S. Truman appointed Eleanor Roosevelt as delegate to the United Nations General Assembly, where she afterwards became the first chairperson of the preliminary UN Commission on Human Rights. She was also the main influence behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. After some time she was also appointed as the first United States Representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights. Her work in the institution granted her the first Human Rights Prize, awarded posthumously in 1968 after her death in 1962. There is no doubt that Eleanor Roosevelt is the ideal example that, as it has been said at the beginning, "behind every great man is a great woman."

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