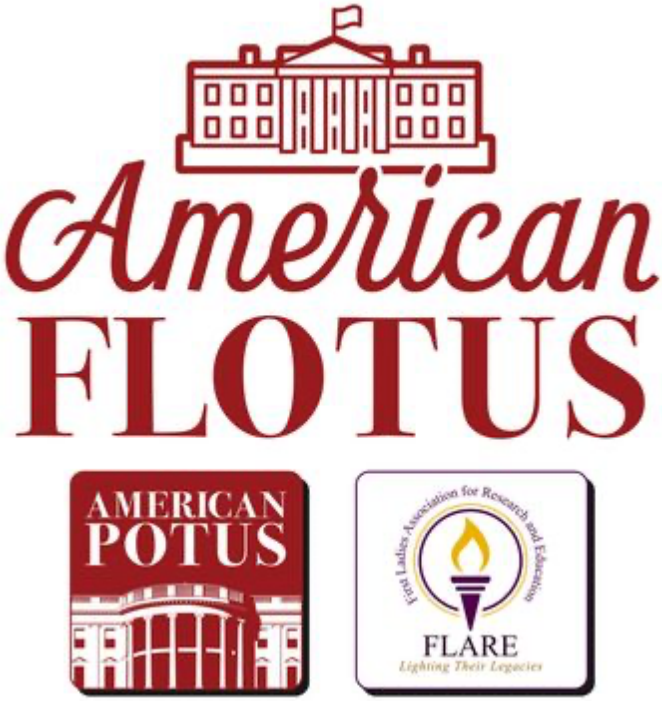

Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Post-War Legacy

Alan Lowe: Welcome to *American FLOTUS*, a podcast produced by partnership with the *American POTUS* podcast, and the First Ladies Association for Research and Education or FLARE. I'm your host, Alan Lowe. Thanks so much for joining us. I'm very glad to welcome on this episode, Dr. Allida Black. Allida is a preeminent expert on perhaps our most influential first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, as the editor emeritus of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers project at George Washington University, a project she led for many years. Allida has written or edited over 10 books and is acknowledged internationally, not only as an expert on Eleanor Roosevelt, but on topics like conflict resolution, human rights, and women's empowerment. She's now the Beth Newburger Schwartz Professor of Practice and Director of the Hillary Rodham Clinton Oral History Project at Georgetown University and also serves as a trustee of the FDR Presidential Library.

Today I'm gonna discuss with Allida her terrific book, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism*. Allida, it's great to see you. Thanks for joining us on *American FLOTUS*.

Allida Black: Oh, Alan, thank you so much and I appreciate your patience trying to schedule me.

Alan: No, no, please. I know you're a busy person and I appreciate you doing this so much. I've so respected your work over the years. You know, for a brief time, brief, wonderful time, I was acting director up at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum and got to know a little bit about Eleanor. Just a tiny smidge of what you know, but I know Eleanor experienced this personal transformation over the years. What do you think were the main factors that enabled or drove that transformation?

Allida: That's a great question. I think Eleanor was just fundamentally brave, and she just refused to be put in a box once she realized what life outside that box could be like. She had a fabulous teacher, Marie Sovestre, at Allenswood Academy and, you know, really taught Eleanor that she had a mind, that she had to learn how to argue both sides of the issue and be strong and clear spoken. Then she falls in love with FDR and then, as love sometimes does, it takes away your outside interest and gets you to focus, almost in a navel-gazing way, on your family. And so that's what Eleanor really did until World War I happened.

Right before World War I, Eleanor had begun to resurrect her interest in immigration, in sanitation, in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. She began to see that women really had a role to play. But she wasn't involved in suffrage really until FDR came out for suffrage. She was much more focused on what women could do in an organizational way to change things, and she became incredibly active in her own right during the First World War. She was involved with the Committee for the Cause and Cures of War, the International Working Women's Association.

She volunteered with injured sailors and soldiers. She worked at the Red Cross Canteen at Union Station, which was totally not an acceptable thing for her, for a woman in her status to do. And so, she really began to get a voice, and she was happy. You know, she just, she got it. And when FDR gets polio, it was as much of an impact on her as it was on him because she literally had just come to grips with his affection for Lucy Mercer. She had found her own voice for the first time, she was making her own friends and really had carved out a life for herself, and when they reconcile, she refused to give that up.

And then I think you can never underestimate the impact that touring the battlefields in Europe had on her. I mean, she saw up close, and in excruciatingly painful ways, the horrors of war. And so, when FDR is stricken with polio, Eleanor has to make the most fateful decision of her life, and that is:

Does she give up who she is, who she struggled so hard to become, to care for him? Or is there a way that they can continue together? And so, they begin to continue together and they learn to love each other in new ways so that they give themselves the permission to become the people that they become. And from that time on, they're only together six months out of the year, from 1921 to FDR's death in 1945.

Alan: So, let's skip to the Second World War, that partnership you're describing. How would you describe that partnership during those war years?

Allida: Well, their relationship had changed. They were much more political partners than they were romantic partners. And what Eleanor realizes, in a way that will not let her stop, is the sacrifices that are being made on a global scale to defeat fascism. And she had become increasingly outspoken as First Lady. I mean, she was the most outspoken white woman of her generation on race. She was incredibly involved in labor organization. She was incredibly involved in immigrant work. And she very much believed that democracy was only as strong as its weakest link. And so, traveling America during the Great Depression showed her the fragility of that and how we really had to figure out what we had in common rather than what we had apart. And so, when the war comes, Eleanor says, "We must remember the lesson of World War I which is, we won the war, but we lost the peace."

So, what kind of world are we fighting for? You know, what do the four freedoms mean? What role do women and immigrants and African Americans have, and Asian-Americans have, in the United States? How do we build a country that is strong and vibrant and has the guts, the moral guts, to stand up and say, "By God, we are gonna fight fascism when the whole world thinks we're gonna lose."

Really, remember when Pearl Harbor's bombed, the United States is surrounded from California all the way around the globe back to England, and the only ally we have is Liberia, who is in Africa, who's giving us rubber, and Great Britain. We have an island between us and fascism.

And so, Eleanor begins to realize that we have to fight the war, but we have to have a clear, realistic reason to fight this war. And so, as she gets involved in home front efforts and becomes very controversial speaking out about race she finally gets to go to the Pacific because she wanted to give the sailors in the Pacific the credit that the soldiers in the Atlantic were getting from Ernie Pyle, because she had a syndicated national column.

And so, when she's there for five weeks; she flies on unpressurized aircraft. She goes deaf in her left ear. She walks fifty miles of hospital corridors in two days. One of the arches in her feet falls. She can never walk again without specially made shoes. And she begins to carry a prayer in her wallet, which I think says more about Eleanor than anything. And that is, “Dear Lord, lest I continue in my complacent ways, help me to remember that somewhere someone died for me today. And if there be war, help me to remember to ask and to answer, am I worth dying for?”

Alan: My gosh. Wow. Amazing. And as this amazing woman looked to that post-war world that she was hoping to create, during the war, you talked about divergences that start to become visible between Eleanor and Franklin on New Deal policies, on civil liberties, those things. Where were those divergences?

Allida: They bitterly disagreed on internment, and I spent ten years trying to figure this out, trying to find a scrap of paper. We know that she met with members of the cabinet who opposed internment. We know that she met with Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas to talk about opposition to internment. We also know that she met with Justice Denton, D-E-N-T-O-N, who was in California and was the dissenting judge in the original Korematsu case.

And so finally, I found a scrap of paper that was, he had sent her his dissent and then had written some notes in the margin about it, and she wrote, “Thanks. I get it,” in the margin. And so, we know that she wanted to adopt Japanese American families. We know that she traveled the country after Pearl Harbor to speak out against attacks on Japanese Americans. She would say, “This is no time for ‘hyphenates’ {unclear}. We are all Americans.” But I would bet my marriage, my mortgage, and my project that FDR said to her, “This is wartime. We are under attack. On this you will not cross me.” And so, Eleanor shuts up. But sometimes she can't keep it all in. She will say, in *My Day*, “it chills my soul to think of American children behind barbed wire,” clearly referencing the internment camps. And then when there's a riot in the Manzanar camp--they're spreading throughout the internment camps—Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes telegraphs FDR and says, “They're hemorrhaging to death. You've gotta send her.” And she's in Arizona visiting their daughter. And so, FDR calls her, and Eleanor goes to the internment camps in Gila River, Arizona.

And while she's there she spent two days really meeting with the internees, getting their hopes, their expectations. She lobbies for men who are there to be able to fight, all kinds of things. And that was the most significant disagreement. I mean, there were others on the integration of Black troops into

the Army. I mean, the Secretary of the Army says, “Leadership is not embedded in the Negro race.” Eleanor could not disagree more and goes to Tuskegee, Alabama, and flies with the Tuskegee Airmen and makes sure that there are photographs and video of her in a military aircraft flown by a Black pilot. So, she'll do things like that.

She was very adamant that women have a major role to play in the war effort, both as WACs [Women’s Army Corps] and enlisted personnel, but also in the defense industries. Women made most of the small arms that were used in the war. They made most of the sonar and radar that were used in the war. And Black women in Baltimore. I want you to think about this: Black women in Baltimore made, loaded, drove, and unloaded every ounce of nitroglycerin that was used in the war. The most dangerous manufacturing job says a lot about race in the United States, but it also says a lot about Eleanor's respect for women in the defense industries. And then also, Eleanor very much believed in the United Nations, and very much wanted a world court, and wanted a place where people could work on an end of the beginnings of war, rather than the beginning of an end of a war.

And so, the day FDR died, she was meeting with Charles Taussig to talk about how to convince FDR to address the trusteeship issues and help an independence movement in the colonies. So, there were big differences.

Alan: You referenced the death of the president and again a major decision for Eleanor. At that point, as you say, she had to decide between living life as FDR’s widow or as herself. What were the big differences between those two choices?

Allida: Well, if you're the widow, you know, they're these proper expectations. You are a symbol. You were not a leader in your own right. By the time she's speaking out against Truman and his indecisiveness in ‘45, she's turned down an offer to be Secretary of Labor. She's turned down an offer to be governor of New York. She's turned down an offer to run what would be the first political action committee in the United States. She's turned down an offer to lead one of the most prestigious colleges in the United States. But she tells Ickes, “You need not worry. My voice will not be silent.” So, she has to figure out how to be respectful of FDR, whom she loves, but also be her own person. And so that first year in the UN is really where Eleanor is herself. She's more herself than the widow. She goes in the widow because Truman puts her in there thinking, “Oh, I'll get some of that Roosevelt stardust,” as he tells a close aide. But he soon realizes that Eleanor is an independent spirit, and when human rights

emerges, and refugees emerge, Eleanor is the major spokesperson in the United Nations.

Alan: Let's talk a bit more about that Eleanor/Harry Truman relationship. Why was there not more of a bonding between these two in the post FDR time?

Allida: Well, it's one of the great folklores of American history because Truman says, "I called her the First Lady of the world." Well, they fought like cats and dogs. And you gotta remember that Truman grows a great deal when he is president. I mean, when he's vice president, he doesn't know about the Manhattan Project. He doesn't know about the bomb. Eleanor knows about the bomb. Eleanor's writing FDR these nighttime memos saying, "Watch out for this person. He's got a big mouth." And Truman makes some really rookie mistakes that alienate her. We have controls—like the government sets prices on rent, food, and wages. And he lifts the controls on rents, but wages are still depressed. So, people can't find a place to live. Then he lifts the controls off of food. Well, the wages are still down and so she's like, Harry, get with the program. And the great story about this, which I should have said as we started, was that when she tells Truman that FDR is dead, she says, "Harry, the president is dead." And you know she's taller than Truman, especially in heels. She's looking down at him and he says, "Oh, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?" And she's with her hand on his shoulder and says, "That's the wrong question. The question is, what can I do for you? Because you're the one that's in trouble now." And by four months into Truman's presidency, she's writing him single space, three-page letters on how to lobby, with direct phone numbers to members of the legislature. And then when he makes contradictory decisions about price controls, Eleanor just lets loose. And so, he has to get her outta the country to get her outta his hair. So, what he does is he sends her to the UN to be a figurehead and she becomes Eleanor.

Alan: So, her role at the UN, what other mechanisms did she use in those post-war years then to connect with the American people and to get her ideas or thoughts out?

Allida: Well, Eleanor was a genius at the media. She used radio before FDR used radio. She had a daily syndicated news column, which was the third most syndicated column in the United States called *My Day*. She had a question and answer column *If You Ask Me*, in McCalls and in Redbook. She started her own TV show. I mean, before there was PBS, there was education television. And she had, sort of like a precursor to *Meet the Press*, running from Brandeis. And then, of course, she was on *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, all this. And she

also had, every year, a nationwide lecture tour where she would both discuss current events, challenges, and popular cultural stuff. Then once she was responsible for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, she becomes its major debating advocate in the United States. So she'd go to professional associations, colleges, the American Bar Association, and debate. If she had 'Twitter' {unclear}, she would've killed me.

Alan: I see an amazing woman in many ways, including how she communicated, Now, of course, in that post-war era, quickly we're in the Cold War. But what were her views, overall, on the Cold War? And then perhaps you can talk to us a bit about how she reacted to the House Committee on Un-American Activities and, of course, Senator McCarthy.

Allida: Sure. Eleanor was a reluctant cold warrior. She did not believe that the Iron Curtain speech was the speech that needed to be given. She thought that exacerbated the situation. She certainly understood that the Soviets had plans and desires to keep the land that they occupied at the end of the war, and the people that were on that land that they had "liberated." But she also understood that the Soviets lost 20 million soldiers and 20 million civilians. The United States lost 500,000. So, she certainly understood that for every American casualty there were 40 Soviets' casualties. So how do you counteract that? And she was a huge proponent of the Marshall Plan.

She didn't like the way, very much, it was administrated. She wanted it to be more of an international thing just than an American thing. But she was very adamant that she was not going to bed every night looking for a communist under her mattress. And so, the sort of panic that seized America was something that she really tried to counteract. And she very much opposed the House Committee on Un-American Activities and even volunteered to go testify in front of it when they started going after some of the people that she respected. There's one person told me that she said to them, "Let them put me out there and see what they do." You know? So, she understood that communism was a threat. But it was not the pernicious, all-invasive poison that anti-communists preached it was in the United States. Does that make sense?

Alan: It does. It does. And I'm thinking of another, Cold War warrior president, John Kennedy, and the relationship you described between Eleanor and John. She had a dislike of him.

Allida: He was a pretty boy to her. She really stayed with elected officials based on the guts that they had and the positions that they took. And that two major issues of Eleanor's time that she judged people on were: Where do you

stand on McCarthy? Senator Joseph McCarthy. And what are you gonna do about civil rights? After *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. And John Kennedy refused to take a stand on McCarthy. He said he was in the hospital—as if that prevented anyone from ever saying anything—and he abstained on all but one of the votes that he could have taken as a senator on civil rights, and the vote that he took weakened the legislation.

And so, she also knew that Ted Sorenson had written *Profiles in Courage* for which John Kennedy got all these accolades. And so, when he decides to run for president, he's gonna be on her TV show the day before. And he doesn't wanna announce on Eleanor. He has this whole thing planned. But she just blindsides him and he has to do it. And then when she begins to speak out about how much money is being spent on the campaign, they get in this correspondence back and forth. "You can't say that [JFK]. Eleanor said, "Yes, I can. This is the information I have." He says, "No, my father's not paying for everything." She says, "You've got the family plane. Where does that fit into all of this?" And so, he just demands all these retractions, and she won't do it. And she sends him my favorite Eleanor document—outside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which says, "My dear young boy, I have learned within a lifetime filled with adversity when it is time to change course. I suggest, son, now it is time to turn the other profile."

Alan: Oh.

Allida: I mean, it was just like, do not bother me. And then when he comes to see her after he gets the nomination and she had gone all out for Adlai Stevenson again, he comes to Val-Kill [Hyde Park] to lobby. And she says, "Well, anything you have to communicate to me you can communicate through my sons." And she does write Mary Lasker to say that he's better than she thought he was. He did show the potential to grow, but that was not a ringing endorsement, and she only endorses him after he comes to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem to appear with Eleanor and Adam Clayton Powell and New York Senator Herbert Lehman on a conference on integrated housing. And so, when he does that, Eleanor agrees to campaign for him and she goes on a sixteen-day, eight city tour for him where I think she makes the difference in Chicago, which gave him the election.

Alan: So obviously a very strong, very brave woman, but throughout her whole life, her whole career, attacked from the right, from the left. How did she deal with those personal and those political attacks?

Allida: I mean, some of them were hurtful, but she was more concerned about going after her sons and daughter and people that were close to her. People forget that when FDR took the oath of office the first time it was in March, not January. He is in Florida before he becomes president and he is in his open touring car, doing a rally in a park with Anton Cermak, the mayor of Chicago and a man tries to assassinate him. And a woman slings her pocketbook on the gun, and the gun moves away from FDR and murders Anton Cermak. And so, FDR and Eleanor have a huge conversation about that, about the cost of leadership and what it entails, and they have a responsibility, and if people come get 'em, they're gonna come get 'em. She refused Secret Service protection her entire life. I mean, there are multiple assassination attempts on her.

Alan: Amazing bravery throughout. As you say, and I know you're not alone in this, that she set the standard for all future first ladies. So, what are some of the ways you think that that standard has influenced those subsequent first ladies?

Allida: Well, I think Eleanor's had a huge influence. She knew Lady Bird Johnson. When Johnson first walked into the halls of Congress, Eleanor sort of took her under her wing. And, certainly, they had a lot in common. They had press, they had ambitious husbands, they were shrewd businesswomen. They had a lot in common. I guess the thing that she had in common with Jackie Kennedy is that they both were champions of the arts and the humanities. Jackie Kennedy helped set up the groundwork for the National Association for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Eleanor did that in the Great Depression. She was the impetus for the Federal One programs—the federal writers' projects, the federal theatre projects, all those [Federal One programs refers to Federal Project Number One, a subdivision of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)]. And I think Pat Nixon does do some interesting work in Africa that nobody ever talks about. And Eleanor did too. Rosalynn Carter, I mean, her middle name is Eleanor [Editor's Note: Rosalynn's first name was Eleanor; Eleanor Roosevelt's first name was Anna, and Eleanor was her middle name]. She [Rosalynn] campaigned as Eleanor. She wanted to do policy as Eleanor. Nancy Reagan probably had more policy influence in the White House than Eleanor did. Barbara Bush was as plainspoken and with a gift for communication but was not really an Eleanor fan. Probably that's because Eleanor went after Vannevar Bush for not being able to keep his mouth shut on the Manhattan Project. And then you cannot underestimate the impact she had on Hillary Clinton.

Alan: And tell me more about that. I know you're working on that oral history project now.

Allida: Well, if there's anybody in the world who understood what it took to be Eleanor Roosevelt, it's Hillary Clinton. They both went in with major careers in their own rights. They were lightning rods for their husbands, but they were also major draws for their husbands. People voted for President Clinton because he was married to Hillary. She was a draw. Gave women big, big hope. They both took risks on major legislation. And they both were global figures in their own right. I mean, Hillary's Beijing speech ignited a global movement the way that Eleanor's work on the Declaration inspired a global movement. And they both traveled incessantly and had also listened to people on the ground. They had great professional networks, but they also had real solid activists on the ground that they trusted and that they listened to, both in the United States and globally. And then Laura Bush was gutsy, I mean, she did a [presidential] radio address. You know, Eleanor never did a [presidential] radio address. Laura Bush did that. And Laura Bush and Afghan women. She was incredibly supportive of that. So, I think the role of First Lady is really flexible. It's amenable to the person that has the role. I think Eleanor gave them a model on what they could do if they wanted to seize it.

Alan: Now I know, Allida, you're doing that important work with the Hillary Clinton Oral History Project. In addition to that, are you working on a book now? What's, what's next?

Allida: No. I mean, I love the FDR Library, you know. I help on exhibits there sometimes. I do a lot of work for Secretary Clinton now. So, I help with exhibits and her educational initiatives on college campuses, but I live, breathe, and eat the oral history project because that's where Eleanor gets short shrift. They hired a couple to do the oral history project for Eleanor and they're not worth the paper they're typed on, you know. So, you miss a lot of the behind-the-scenes negotiations. And so, I'm trying to capture that, warts and all, for Secretary Clinton.

Alan: And such an important project for our history.

Allida: Absolutely.

Alan: Thank you for doing that and thank you so much for joining us today. A great conversation.

Allida: My pleasure and thank you again for your flexibility.

Alan: Of course. Of course. And I wanna thank you, and I also want to thank everyone who joined us today. To hear more *American FLOTUS* episodes

please go to flare-net.org or americanpotus.org or to your favorite podcast platform. Thanks very much. I'll see you next time on *American FLOTUS*.