

Bold Ways

A Comparative Study of Eleanor Roosevelt and Michelle Obama

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Abstract:

First Ladies of the United States provide a sense of stability and care to the nation. They are held up as role models for women of their time and teach us the value of emotional labor in times of turmoil. Eleanor Roosevelt and Michelle Obama are the epitome of these ideals; albeit they had vastly different strategies of deploying them. This is a comparative study of how the two used the office of FLOTUS as a catalyst to encourage women to live boldly.

Chapter 1: Introduction

FDR was elected in the middle of the Great Depression when joblessness was pervasive and families had a hard time feeding themselves. He promised sweeping change in the form of the New Deal. It was an ambitious plan. He proposed the biggest overhaul of the government since the Civil War. His unshakable confidence came through loud and in his inaugural address, “This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and prosper... the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”¹ He inspired a nation, so much so, that he was elected four times.

Just as the Great Depression was ending World War II was beginning, FDR steered us through dangerous and uncertain times with his wife, Eleanor, by his side. Women’s rights was becoming a burgeoning issue. Women had just gained the right to

¹ Britannica, FDR <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Franklin-D-Roosevelt/The-first-term>

vote just as WWI was ending. The nation was a whirlwind of change; facing one crisis after another. Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) became a beloved First Lady, indeed she was eventually named First Lady of the World, by being herself. She waded into policy issues facing the FDR administration and was forthright in her views. Famous for being the eyes and ears of FDR she traveled over 40,000 miles in her first year as the President's wife.² Appealing to average women to do their civic duty during the hard times, she as a role model for women. She was the friend you wanted in your corner when times were bad; she'd help you find a way to solve whatever the matter was. Women felt an intimate connection to her.

Barack Obama was elected during the turmoil of the 2008 economic crisis; inheriting the Great Recession. At the time the United States was also in the midst of the Iraq War. Being the first black President gave him critics; notably the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party. He signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and signed into law the Affordable Care Act during his first term. Barack Obama became the kindly and plain-spoken professor guiding the nation through turmoil; just as FDR had. Michelle Obama (MO) was billed as the Mom-in-chief, focusing on family, and the honest girlfriend you wanted to sit at the kitchen table and have coffee with. Women felt an intimate connection with her.

Even as both ER and MO were spokeswomen for their husbands administrations, they spoke to women of their time in a language and in a way that made a difference to how average women saw themselves. They both became FLOTUS at times of upheaval and uncertainty and both were called upon bear the weight of providing

² Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/first-lady-world>

emotional labor to heal the country with empathy and care; albeit they each deployed it in vastly different ways.

ER was a trailblazing powerhouse. She provided the emotional labor it took to carry the nation from the Great Depression through World War II. This labor took various forms throughout her time in the White House, but always had her forthright directness at its center. Whether it was fighting for the New Deal's ideals, bullying her husband to appoint more women in his administration, directly appealing to women's sense of duty in her press conferences, walking into potential hostility when she walked into the Bonus Marchers camp, tirelessly working on behalf of candidates whose support was thrown behind the New Deal, or championing human rights and working on the UDHR she was constantly doing something concrete to move the world towards healing. She wanted to get things done and wanted to see the real world results. She wanted to motivate people to do the same.

She had the advantage of being able to be a trailblazer, in part, for two reasons. The first being that she came from a wealthy and connected family. A clear example of this is that President Teddy Roosevelt, her uncle, gave her away at her wedding. Her status allowed her the freedom to maneuver in society in a privileged way.

The second reason is her whiteness. Being a white woman gave her the ability to move beyond the typical boundaries that women were to stay within. She could cross these boundaries, such as walking alone safely into a camp full of men, without experiencing the backlash and social repercussions she would have had she not been privileged and white.

MO was the calm eye of the storm. It was this calm confidence that the nation needed from her; the sense that no matter what the nation was going to be alright. Her emotional labor took the form of projecting a normal life; she was just like everyone else. She allowed us to see ourselves in her; the way she raised her kids, her struggles to eat healthy and exercise, her importance of family, teasing and making fun of her husband, being silly for silliness sake. She didn't take herself too seriously and that allowed the nation to laugh and find a sense of lightness even as we were pushing through the storm.

MO had to tread carefully because of her blackness. She did not have the luxury of being able to step away from convention, because if she had she would have caused a national uproar. She had to fight against the angry black woman stereotype. In order to do so she had to try to reach people, while not being too pushy or getting too emotional about issues. This may have been one of the main reasons she projected such a calm presence.

Each woman, in her own way, found her path to walk as First Lady and each of them gave the nation what it needed at the time.

Chapter 2: Literature Review:

First Ladies are viewed as the ‘every woman’ and how she comports herself has been looked at as a templet for the women of their time. First Ladies are not elected and as Robert Watson explains in his article “Source Material”: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship, “the first ladyship as an office is an extraconstitutional development”³ He argues that even though first ladies aren’t elected, nor appointed, it’s “an office, but one without portfolio, statutory legitimacy, electoral mandate, or clearly defined roles and responsibilities.”⁴ Watson argues that this ambiguity of the role makes studying first ladies at all a challenge at best and mainly ignored at worst.

Another reason it’s a challenge to study First Ladies is because the patriarchal system prioritizes men and their values, acts, and ambitions over women’s. Patriarchy is closely and complexly intertwined with gender. Allen Johnson, in *Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us*, argues patriarchy is not just defined as “male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered”⁵, but is “at it’s core, patriarchy is a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversations to literature and film”⁶ It’s the way society is organized and the system lives are lived in. As Allen argues, patriarchy gives us the opportunity to either perpetuate it or change it. This system is more than a collection of

³ Watson, Robert P, “Source Material”: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Jun., 2003, Vol. 33, pp 423-441

⁴ Watson, Robert P, “Source Material”: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Jun., 2003, Vol. 33, pp 423-441

⁵ Johnson, Allen, *Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us*

⁶ Johnson, Allen, *Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us*

individuals and as such can exist without men being the villains or women being the good-hearted victims. For it to be oppressive it only needs those who participate in it to accept it as normal without questioning it too closely; aka taking the path of least resistance. He argues it's our cultural ideas about the nature of things such as "men, women, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human nature and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of "other"⁷. It's about how social life is and how it's supposed to be; about what's expected of people and about how they feel. It's about standards of feminine beauty and masculine toughness, images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness....It's about the primary importance of a husband's career and the secondary status of a wife's, about child care as a priority in women's lives and its secondary importance in men's"⁸ Johnson argues the qualities most valued in the patriarchal culture is control and domination of all aspects of human life. In this system gaining and exercising this power is the ultimate focus, which has the consequence of narrowing the definition of power. It uplifts the ideas of controlling others behavior and resources while pushing down ideas of cooperation and giving freely. He argues that culturally, to have power and the willingness to use it is deemed a masculine trait and thus desirable, but the inverse or the unwillingness to use it is seen as feminine and thus weak. He argues the patriarchal culture is a complicated web that determines reality and what should be reached for as good and what should be pushed down as bad, but it's complicated. As he puts it "behavior is shaped by paths of resistance

⁷ Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

⁸ Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

found in the systems people participate in.”⁹ The system is made of of individuals who make up society and participate in it, but it’s the relationship between the two that Johnson argues we need to understand. It’s the “nature of the thing we participate in and how we choose to participate in it and how both are shaped in the process.”¹⁰ Understanding this is important, because this is the foundation of how we construct a sense of who we are, how we also decide who other people are, and what kind of world we live in. For example, Johnson says when a woman gets married the way people view her and the way she sees herself is changed as “cultural ideas of what it means to be a wife come into play-ideas about how wives feel about their husbands, for example what’s most important to wives, what’s expected of them, and what they may expect of others....”¹¹ Another way to think about it is that patriarchy seems like a very abstract thing not really connected to our everyday lives, but Johnson argues “when men and women actually talk and men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, or men ignore topics introduced by women in favor of their own or in other ways control the conversation”¹² that this is patriarchy in action in our every day lives.

While patriarchy relegates women to the outside, the added challenge here pertains to race. Michelle Obama is our first black First Lady; historically the voices of black women have been silenced. Barbara Welke argues In her article *When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road*

⁹ Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

¹⁰ Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

¹¹ Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

¹² Johnson, Allen, Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us

to *Plessy 1855-1914*, that the nature of race relations was complicated. Black women's stories and voices are absent "from the existing narrative", which "lies at the heart of the justification for women's history".¹³ Scholars have consistently "resisted seeing gender as an explanatory fact in law and history", but in recent years have recognized the glaring gap that exists because of the lack of black women's "voices from the historical narrative".¹⁴ As Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham wrote "the sound of silence, which resonates throughout much of the scholarship on Afro-Americans, and women, reflects the failure to recognize black women's history as not only an identifiable field of inquiry in its own right, but as an integral part of Afro-American, and women's history."¹⁵ Welke argues this lack of acknowledgement extends to legal scholarship as well, saying "women of color have increasingly challenged the refusal in law to see women of color, both as women and as of color"¹⁶ To understand her argument there is the historical context to consider. In the nineteenth century the "middle-class ideology of separate spheres provided the ideological underpinnings for the gendering of American society"; where the home was the woman's domain and public "sphere of

¹³ Welke, Barbara Y. "When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914." *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261-316.

¹⁴ Welke, Barbara Y. "When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914." *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261-316.

¹⁵ Quote: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender and History* 1 (Spring 1989): 50.

¹⁶ Welke, Barbara Y. "When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914." *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261-316.

work and politics” was the man’s.¹⁷ This led to what Mary Ryan, a historian, termed “gendered spaces” and as Welke states, “Nowhere was the concept of gendered spaces and gendered public conduct more clearly mapped out than in travel”.¹⁸ Travel, she argues, was the world writ small, so the same social boundaries that existed in society also existed in the spaces of transition. Welke argues that the relentless and unswerving goal of white Southerners was to “protect white womanhood”, because if white womanhood ceased to be privileged that would signal the downfall of white supremacy. She argues that existing structures that accommodated white women proved a “double-edged sword” in that they “provided a compelling legal analogy to justify separation by race, yet at the same time they created a pressure for equality based on a gender shared across racial lines”.¹⁹ Welke states “the stumbling block was a person of color in the shape of a lady.”²⁰ The assumption was that “all the women were white and all the blacks were men”²¹ Black women challenged the courts “to justify a system” that was clearly unfair,

¹⁷ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

¹⁸ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

¹⁹ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²⁰ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²¹ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

racist, and misogynistic.²² Welke argues both state and federal courts came back with decisions that businesses had to “provide substantially equal accommodations to all paying the same fare”.²³ It was clear that “white woman’s sacred place - hence white supremacy- was not secure in the hands of carriers and courts”.²⁴ Black women’s voices were heard, but have largely disappeared from the historiography of race relations; Welke argues this is mostly because “scholars have ignored the argument underlying women’s challenges to their exclusion from ladies’ accommodations or the conditions of their segregation”, legal scholars have been preoccupied with “constitutional law and the law as stated in appellate legal opinions”, and the “failure of scholars to see women because they have assumed that women were not political actors”.²⁵

To be sure, the women who inhabit the office of FLOTUS have not always been policy or politically minded. Martha Washington set the parameters of future first ladies during her time as the first First Lady “establishing three primary roles - public figure, hostess, and presidential confidante”²⁶ Others followed suit. “Mary Todd Lincoln

²² Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²³ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²⁴ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²⁵ Welke, Barbara Y. “When All the Women Were White, and All the Blacks Were Men: Gender, Class, Race, and the Road to Plessy, 1855-1914.” *Law and History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261–316.

²⁶ Fu, Shu, & Savel, Meg. (2020). Policy without partisanship: the direct appeals of first ladies. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50(4), 736-761.

hosted regular public receptions, with a gridlock of visitors herded through the eastern gate and ushered out through the western gate. President Lincoln and his wife shook hands with everyone in the receiving line, standing there for two hours if necessary.”²⁷ Dolly Madison was billed as a “fabulous hostess: She wore flamboyant turbans spiked with ostrich plumes, held evening gatherings nearly every Wednesday, and wowed guests with dishes of ice cream as pianos tinkled and guitars strummed”²⁸ As time wore on the office of the FLOTUS evolved into something more substantial with First Ladies having a voice when it came to policy. Fu and Savel, in their 2020 study, found that first ladies comment regularly on policy issues and “they craft the speeches with a *personal, rather than formal*, communication style that uses vocabulary frequently considered more feminine or compassionate.”²⁹

This place of femininity is where Denise Rall, Jo Coghlan, Lisa Hackett, and Annita Boyd in their article ‘*Dressing Up*’ *Two Democratic First Ladies: Fashion as Political Performance in America* argue the First Ladies inhabit. The women who inhabit the office of FLOTUS are the bearers of emotional labor in popular imagination; being the supportive wife and mother. They argue the public doesn’t react well when First Ladies deviate from the ceremonial aspects of their job, which solidifies the traditional ideas of the woman’s place being in the home. Their further point is that the whole

²⁷ Vogue, New York, Vol 199, Iss 3 (Mar 1, 2009)

²⁸ Vogue, New York, Vol 199, Iss 3 (Mar 1, 2009)

²⁹ Fu, Shu, & Savel, Meg. (2020). Policy without partisanship: the direct appeals of first ladies. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50(4), 736-761.

point of “gender performance is conformity”³⁰ where First Ladies “become *sites* for the symbolic negotiation of female identity”³¹

FLOTUS carry with them an immense responsibility to represent all women almost without their expressed permission. Jill Abraham Hummer argues gender performance and “the cultural everywoman ideal is an essential component of the first lady’s position that obliges her to uphold the dominant cultural belief about American womanhood in all of her acts of political representation.”³² Hummer argues when she upholds these ideals then there is virtually no discussion about it, but when she does not then “she becomes a lightning rod for public criticism and her legitimacy as a political representative is called into question”³³. Along those same lines, Sandra Combs argues, in her article *FLOTUS: Media Darling or Monster?*, “the role and expectations of the First Lady are incongruous and sometimes there is not middle of the road place for the FLOTUS to stand. “Feminine or feminist? Family-oriented or career-focused? Submissive or independent? Chief advisor or Chief’s wife and homemaker?”³⁴ The dichotomies Combs illuminates can only bring tension to the role of FLOTUS and, as each woman who inhabits that role is different, they all deal with the tension in their own ways.

³⁰ Rall, Denise, Coghlan, Jo, Hackett, Lisa, Boyd, Annita, ‘Dressing Up’ Two Democratic First Ladies: Fashion as Political Performance in America, *Fashion, Women & Power*, Intellect 2022

³¹ Rall, Denise, Coghlan, Jo, Hackett, Lisa, Boyd, Annita, ‘Dressing Up’ Two Democratic First Ladies: Fashion as Political Performance in America, *Fashion, Women & Power*, Intellect 2022

³² Hummer, Jill Abraham, *First Ladies and the Cultural Everywoman Ideal: Gender Performance and Representation*, *White House Studies*, Vol 9, Issue 4, Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

³³ Hummer, Jill Abraham, *First Ladies and the Cultural Everywoman Ideal: Gender Performance and Representation*, *White House Studies*, Vol 9, Issue 4, Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

³⁴ Combs, Sandra L., *Race, Gender & Class*, 2013, Vol. 20 No. 1/2, *Race, Gender, & Class* 2012, Jean Ait Belkhir, *Race, Gender, & Class Journal*

Chapter 3: Methodology

The primary purpose of this work is to examine how Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) and Michelle Obama (MO) provided the emotional labor the nation needed in their respective times by analyzing how they used their roles as FLOTUS and their policy initiatives. There have been 46 First Ladies of the United States (FLOTUS). I chose these two women because, while both were wildly popular and beloved in their time, they used the office of FLOTUS in vastly different ways. Their husbands were popular and, while FDR dealt with the Great Depression and WW II and Barack Obama dealt with the Great Recession, both women were called to care and nurture the nation; albeit in different ways. It's also worth noting that ER spent 12 years in the White House as the longest serving FLOTUS ever and MO spent 8 years in the White House. Such long runs in the White House gave each of them unique perspectives of their roles as FLOTUS. For these reasons I chose these women.

This work uses historical and biographical research to examine the ways ER and MO used their office as FLOTUS to show care to a nation in need. Historical and biographical research delves into “exploring and understanding the meaning” people give to “social and human” issues and allows for the complexity of human problems to be more completely reported.³⁵ I take a constructivist view point in this research; meaning the assumptions are that people make meaning as they move through the world and make sense of it through both “historical and social perspectives, and the

³⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design*. 5th ed., SAGE Publications, 2018.

way meaning is made “arises out of interaction with human community”³⁶ Historical and biographical research methods use primary and secondary sources to draw a more complete picture of an individual. This type of research uses primary sources such as “speeches, letters, comics/cartoons, songs, legislation, court decisions, journals/diaries, interviews, artifacts, autobiographies, statistics, experiments, and photographs” in order to paint a more complex picture of an individual.³⁷

The primary sources used for ER were letters written to her in her column *If You Ask Me (1941-1945)*, her thoughts from her column *My Day (1936-1945)*, transcripts of her on the *Ponds Dance Program* right before FDR took office (1932), The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project as a primary source for many of her quotes, and transcript of her speech to the UN. These were chosen for ease of access and/or according to relevance to her policy initiatives, her role as First Lady, her role in the UN, and her personal attitudes and feeling towards FDR.

For MO, the primary sources used were her interviews in Newsweek, Prevention, Vogue, Ebony, PR Newswire, USA Today, Voice of America, CBS This Morning, Good Housekeeping, People, and Associated Press. Interviews ranged from 2008 to 2016 and were chosen for ease of access and/or according to relevance to her policy initiatives, her role as First Lady, importance of family, and her personal narrative.

³⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design*. 5th ed., SAGE Publications, 2018.

³⁷ MCLA - Historical Methods and Theory - <https://library.mcla.edu/historiography>

Secondary sources, books, and other documents, are also used in historical and biographical research to provide background and interpretation.³⁸ They were chosen according to relevance to the stories of ER and MO.

Data collected was limited to what was accessible from a remote location. The sheer amount of documentation for both women is overwhelming, so data was also narrowed from the point both women were married through their husband's presidencies. For ER I chose to extend the data collection to include her work on the UDHR as it was an important element in her story. For MO I limited the interviews to when she was FLOTUS. Data collection was also limited by time constraints as well as relevance to my stated objective.

³⁸ MCLA - Historical Methods and Theory - <https://library.mcla.edu/historiography>

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

“If Eleanor Roosevelt was a grandmother of the women’s movement, Mrs.

Obama is a daughter of it.”³⁹

Eleanor Roosevelt:

Eleanor Roosevelt, or as she was called at the time Mrs. Franklin D Roosevelt, was a reluctant first lady. At one point saying about her husband’s run at the presidency in 1932, “I knew what traditionally would lie before me and I cannot say I was pleased.”⁴⁰ By the time FDR ran for president, she knew what laid before her and felt that it would suffocate her.⁴¹ To understand her hesitance, one must rewind time. ER and FDR were married in 1905 and lived three blocks from Sara Roosevelt, FDR’s mother; who became a constant presence in Eleanors life.⁴² The couple quickly began having children (Anna 1906, James 1907, Franklin Jr 1909, Elliot 1910, Franklin Jr the second 1914, and John 1916)⁴³. When she looked back at this period of her life she said, "for ten years I was always just getting over having a baby or about to have one,

³⁹ Quote: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504.

⁴⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

⁴¹ Quote: [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

⁴² Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁴³ Paraphrase: FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

and so my occupations were considerably restricted during this period."⁴⁴ Although ER had been living a traditional life it is not how she envisioned her life; she wanted more.

In 1911 FDR was elected to the New York State Senate and she was eager to live on her own as they moved to Albany, later saying "I wanted to be independent. I was beginning to realize that something within me craved to be an individual."⁴⁵ Much changed for ER as she fulfilled her social duties and learned the rules of political society. In 1913 FDR was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy and ER oversaw the moves between Albany, Hyde Park, and Washington saying "I was really well schooled now. . . . I simply knew that what we had to do we did, and that my job was to make it easy."⁴⁶ This is the time when ER really began to sense that she was capable and had an independent spirit.

Both family life and FDR's career had taken a vast amount of her time and resources. WWI changed everything, though. She was liberated from her social obligations and in 1918 she started working with the Red Cross and volunteering in Navy Hospitals.⁴⁷ This was the first time in her adult life that she realized that she, herself, had something valuable to give the world outside of her husband's political career and that she could serve and contribute her resources to her interests.⁴⁸ It was liberating and she started taking on a more public persona as she waded into things

⁴⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁴⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁴⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁴⁷ FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

⁴⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

that was important to her. This was also the year she found out FDR was having an affair with Lucy Mercer, her social secretary.⁴⁹ She wrote a friend saying "The bottom dropped out of my own particular world, and I faced myself, my surroundings, my world, honestly for the first time"⁵⁰ There was talk of divorce at that point, but it would have meant the end of FDR's political career, so they drove a bargain between the two of them; which included separate bedrooms and his agreement to cease and desist seeing Mercer.⁵¹ During this time ER started to find her own identity in her work, which dovetailed with the intimate separation between her and FDR.

The intimate marriage they had before the Mercer affair was gone, although they "remained affectionate partners"⁵². Both FDR and ER created strong bonds with different co-workers and friends while maintaining and valuing their own friendship. Not too long after that, in 1920, FDR was tapped to be the Democratic Vice-President to James Cox's President, and ER relished being involved in the political decisions the campaign faced on a daily basis.⁵³ However Republican Warren Harding won that election; at which time the Roosevelts returned to New York where FDR practiced law and ER became grounded in her political convictions; realizing that it takes more than

⁴⁹ [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

⁵⁰ [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

⁵¹ [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

⁵² Carlson, Peter. "FDR's Loyal Mistress." *American History*, vol. 45, no. 5, Dec. 2010, pp. 44-47.

⁵³ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

ideology to win votes.⁵⁴ ER called this time in their lives a “private interlude”⁵⁵. During this time ER began to cultivate her own friends and started to think about her own political leanings and aspirations.

She was a pragmatist and urged reform groups to “set realistic goals, prioritize their tasks, and delegate assignments.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, this gave her notoriety, so much so that the New York Times called her a “woman [of influence] who speaks her political mind”⁵⁷. Her political work expanded as she chaired League of Women’s Voters Legislative Affairs Committee. She “studied the Congressional Record, examined legislation and committee reports, interviewed members of Congress and the State Assembly” in order to analyze and present reports outlining what the status of various bills the League was interested in and she had recommendations and strategies on how the League could achieve their goals.⁵⁸ This experience, along with what she gained by working with the “Women’s Trade Union League, Women’s Division of the New York State Democratic Committee”⁵⁹ gave her the political chops to be a successful partner with FDR after he contracted polio. During this time she did the hard work, on her own, of making her political aspirations a reality.

⁵⁴ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁵⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁵⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁵⁷ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁵⁸ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁵⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

By 1928 when FDR ran for governor, ER had created her own network and was a “political leader in her own right”⁶⁰, which she was loathsome to lose. “Once just a “political wife,” she gradually extended that role and used it as a vehicle to assert her own personality and agenda.”⁶¹ She dictated “as many as 100 letters a day, sent to countless groups, acting as an advocate of social reform and women’s issues”⁶². During this time she solidified her identity in her work, which became her passion.

This gave her the ability to create community with “many politically conscious women”, which led to relationships that lasted throughout her life.⁶³ Saying of Molly Dawson, “The nicest thing about politics is lunch with you on Mondays.”⁶⁴ Later she would fear when FDR became President she would lose her hard-fought autonomy that she had spent years developing.⁶⁵ She told her son James “she knew that [FDR] had wanted her to become active in politics primarily to keep his case in the public eye... and would expect her to move into the shadows if he moved into the limelight”⁶⁶. During this time she realized her autonomy and female friendships were very important to her. At this point it’s also becoming clear that ER felt some resentment towards FDR.

⁶⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

⁶¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

⁶² Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

⁶³ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

⁶⁴ Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

⁶⁵ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁶⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

As FDR ascended to Governor of New York, ER found solace in her work helping to establish Val-Kill Industries, a non-profit furniture factory in Hyde Park, New York, and teaching at the Todhunter School, a private girls' school in New York City⁶⁷. She moved between the social duties of a governor's wife and fulfilling her work on her own.⁶⁸ In 1932, during FDR's presidential campaign, ER was unsure of what the future held and after he won the election she said " For him, of course, I'm glad - sincerely. I could not have wanted it any other way. After all I'm a Democrat, too. Now I shall have to work out my own salvation, I'm afraid it may be a little difficult. I know what Washington is like. I've lived there."⁶⁹ During this time ER buried herself in her work, but uncertainty about her future and her resentment toward FDR is evident.

It has been said ER "enjoyed tremendous influence largely because she lived a double life —playing gracious First Lady in public and relentless power broker off camera".⁷⁰ It has also been said "The White House became a somewhat different place under the influence of Mrs. Roosevelt. Except for the formal occasions and official events, there was a gay informality about it, with grandchildren and an odd assortment of dogs scampering through its halls. Visitors were frequent and, Mrs. Roosevelt once

⁶⁷ Paraphrase: FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

⁶⁸ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁶⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁷⁰ Quote: [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

Note: My favorite quote from this article that speaks to ER's rebellious double-life: "Modern First Ladies would recognize almost nothing about **Eleanor's** life. She declined Secret Service protection and carried her own gun (and permit) when necessary. She kept an apartment in New York City's Greenwich Village--in a house owned by a lesbian couple with whom she was good friends--and spent much of her time there when her husband was President."

laughingly remarked, "We call it a hotel.""⁷¹ But it was a complicated and long journey to get there. ER did not envision a conventional life, indeed, this is the time when she purposefully walked away from the traditional role of President's wife.

Between the election in 1932 and the inauguration in 1933 ER was criticized in the media because of her outside commitments to her own work; the media labeled this a commercialism, but still she persisted in doing her own thing.⁷² She made it clear that she wanted to be herself; "plain, ordinary Mrs. Roosevelt"⁷³ This is the time when she realized things were changing, but still insisted on being herself.

The first one hundred days, as well as the next several years, of FDR's presidency was devoted to the New Deal, which was a package of domestic programs to help "alleviate the suffering of the nation's huge number of unemployed workers" due to the Great Depression; it housed "reforms in industry, agriculture, finance, waterpower, labour, and housing."⁷⁴ This included "trade practices, wages, hours, child labor, and collective bargaining... The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) granted government insurance for bank deposits in member banks of the Federal Reserve and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) was established in 1934... The farm program, known as the Agricultural Adjustment Act was signed in May 1933...in addition, the arm of the federal government reached in other areas of electric power...

⁷¹ Quote: ER Obituary, New York Times, November 8, 1962, Mrs Roosevelt, First Lady 12 Years, Often Called 'World's Most Admired Woman'

⁷² Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁷³ Paraphrase and Quote: FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

⁷⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Britannica, New Deal, US History, <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal>

to supply cheap electricity, prevent floods, improve navigation, and produce nitrates”⁷⁵
 It was during this time that ER felt very connected to her policy ideals.

The New Deal was a big deal and it was in ER’s blood.⁷⁶ She was passionate about the “rights and needs of the poor, of minorities, and of the disadvantaged”⁷⁷, saying “The unemployed are not a strange race. They are like we would be if we had not had a fortunate chance at life”⁷⁸. So, when she asked to have some job or duties in his administration, but was denied it hurt her.⁷⁹ FDR asked her to resign her positions with the DNC, The Todhunter School where she taught, The League of Women Voters, the Non-Partisan Legislative Committee and the Women’s Trade Union League.⁸⁰ After that she said she wouldn’t participate in commercial radio events nor would she discuss her political views in her magazine articles.⁸¹ In reality this sentiment didn’t last all that long. However, at the time, what she felt was that convention was taking hold of her career; she not only was depressed about it she wasn’t sure what to do about it.⁸² Although, she could see “the work [was FDR’s] work and the pattern his pattern” and

⁷⁵ Quote: Britannica, New Deal, US History, <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal>

⁷⁶ I’m sure someone has said this before me, but I have not come across anything and this phrase comes out of my own thoughts.

⁷⁷ Paraphrase: FDR Presidential Library, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography>

⁷⁸ Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁷⁹ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸⁰ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸¹ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸² Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

she admitted she “was one of those who served his purposes.”⁸³ She worked to make the best of it. During this time she seen her dreams of being seriously involved in her husband’s administration die. This was also the time that she realized that her fate was not her own and that FDR, indeed, had power over her.

ER relished her independence, saying “she wanted “to do things on my own, to use my own mind and abilities for my own aims.”⁸⁴ It was hard on her that she didn’t have a “real-job” to do in the administration and the New Deal.⁸⁵ However, FDR put her to good use from time to time. Not long after taking office, in May 1933, World War I veterans and their families marched once again (the first time was the year before) on Washington demanding “payment of their military pensions”; they became known as the Bonus Marchers.⁸⁶ When the Bonus Marchers were in Washington the year before Herbert Hoover ran them out of town using the US horse cavalry and burning their campsites to the ground; death and mayhem didn’t sit well with ER.⁸⁷ When they returned the next year FDR provided a clean campsite with sanitation along with breakfast, lunch, and dinner at Fort Hunt in Virginia while offering the veterans a concession.⁸⁸ Instead of the lump sum the Bonus Marchers wanted, FDR was offering

⁸³ Phrarraphrase and quotes: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸⁴ Phrarraphrase and quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸⁵ Phrarraphrase and quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

⁸⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁸⁷ Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁸⁸ Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

them a place in the Civilian Conservation Corps, “a public works jobs program”, and the fort would be converted into a training facility for them.⁸⁹ In order to sell the idea FDR sent ER to work her pragmatic, with her own brand of femininity, magic. Louis Howe, a friend and advisor to both FDR and ER, asked ER to take a drive with him without explaining anything to her.⁹⁰ As they drove, Howe explained what needed to be done by her, and her alone, “ to which the Secret Service would have objected strenuously, if they had known”.⁹¹ So, she walked into camp, while Howe took a nap in the car.⁹² ER said “They looked at me curiously, and one of them asked my name and what I wanted... when I said I just want to see how they were getting on, they asked me to join them.”⁹³ ER sat, drank coffee, and sang with the men and then took a tour of the camp; wading through “ankle-deep mud to visit their living quarters and the camp’s hospital”⁹⁴. She gave a spontaneous speech conveying her sincere apologies for not being able to fulfill their hopes of a pension and sympathizing with their frustrations.⁹⁵ She relayed her experience during the war; telling them about her volunteer work driving “a truck into the railroad yards at night and serv[ing] sandwiches and coffee to

⁸⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁰ Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹² Paraphrase: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹³ Quote: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁵ Paraphrase: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

soldiers who were waiting to ship out”⁹⁶ ER also spoke of how it touched her heart when she would see wounded soldiers returning from battle.⁹⁷ She told the protesters, “I never want to see another war... I would like to see fair consideration of everyone, and I shall always be grateful to those who served their country. I hope we will never have to ask such service again.”⁹⁸ Afterwards she went back to the car, with the vets in tow to say good-bye, woke Howe up and headed back home.⁹⁹ This was ER’s first “effort acting as an emissary for the White House”¹⁰⁰. This was a time of transition for ER as she worked to find her place.

It was the first of many trips for her, but at the time she didn’t have a defined role, so she carved one out for herself. At the suggestion of her close friend, Lorena Hickok, ER decided to take matters into her own hands.¹⁰¹ Two days after her husband became president she held her own press conference where she would gather women reporters every week.¹⁰² This despite the Victorian ideals that women should not attract attention

⁹⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁷ Paraphrase: Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁸ Quote: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

⁹⁹ Paraphrase: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

¹⁰⁰ Quote: Boundary Stones WETS”s Local History Website, <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2014/09/08/eleanor-roosevelt-and-bonus-marchers>

¹⁰¹ Paraphrase: The Social Science Journal, Volume 37, Number 4, Pages 517-528, Beasley, Maurine, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Press Conferences: Case Study in Class, Gender, and Race

¹⁰² Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

in the public sphere.¹⁰³ “She wanted to make the general public more aware of White House activities and to encourage their understanding of the political process.¹⁰⁴ She hoped that the women reporters who covered her would interpret, especially to American women, the basic mechanics of national politics.”¹⁰⁵ Especially in a time when “as a group, American women had moved beyond defining characteristics of well-bred womanhood in the Victorian period - “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity”... yet, the majority of married women remained at home and the percentage of working women in the population study at 24.3% in 1930”.¹⁰⁶ At her first press conference, ER told the women reporters “... your position as I look upon it is to try to tell the women throughout the country what you think they should know... You are the interpreters to the women of the country as to what gets on politically in the legislative national life, and also as to what the social and personal life is at the White House”¹⁰⁷ The press conferences were a way she could educate and act as a sort of mom-in-chief to the nation; in short it was her outlet for speaking directly to the people about how she saw the world.¹⁰⁸ However, it was not the only way. During this time ER found a way to circumvent FDR’s power and gave her meaningful work to do.

¹⁰³ Paraphrase: The Social Science Journal, Volume 37, Number 4, Pages 517-528, Beasley, Maurine, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Press Conferences: Case Study in Class, Gender, and Race

¹⁰⁴ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁰⁵ Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁰⁶ Quote: The Social Science Journal, Volume 37, Number 4, Pages 517-528, Beasley, Maurine, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Press Conferences: Case Study in Class, Gender, and Race

¹⁰⁷ Quote: The Social Science Journal, Volume 37, Number 4, Pages 517-528, Beasley, Maurine, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Press Conferences: Case Study in Class, Gender, and Race

¹⁰⁸ Paraphrase: The Social Science Journal, Volume 37, Number 4, Pages 517-528, Beasley, Maurine, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Press Conferences: Case Study in Class, Gender, and Race

Around the same time she was holding press conferences she was also putting together the pieces of a book; *It's Up to the Women*.¹⁰⁹ It was printed in November 1933 and was “a compilation of speeches and articles...[which] chattily interlaced everyday advice on such things as menus, household budgets, childrearing, and getting along with one’s husband with fervent appeals to women to lead in the movement for social justice, to join and support trade unions, to set up consumer groups to police the NRA, and to enter politics.”¹¹⁰ She also had a monthly column in *Women’s Home Companion*, the money she earned went to charity, in which she asked her readers to “help her establish “a clearinghouse, a discussion room” for “the particular problems which puzzle you or sadden you” and to share “how you are adjusting yourself to new conditions in this amazing changing world”.¹¹¹ She constantly told her readers “Do not hesitate to write to me even if your views clash with what you believe to be my views” and by January 1934, 300,000 people had written to her.¹¹² During this time ER was connected to the people of the nation; especially women. Her message was one of both home life and civic duty.

This was also the same time ER made a concerted effort to be a serious contributor to the administration; making a study for herself out of the Lincoln bedroom so she would have someplace to work, urging her husband to send Hickok out to find

¹⁰⁹ Paraphrase: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹¹⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹¹¹ Paraphrase and Quote: ¹¹¹ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹¹² Paraphrase and Quote: ¹¹² Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

out what was happening in the nation for the Federal Emergency Relief Association, and helping to pressure the administration to “appoint women to positions of influence throughout the New Deal programs”¹¹³ When Hickok wrote to ER about the terrible conditions of poverty in a West Virginia coal town ER took immediate action enlisting the help of Louis Howe, and Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, to figure out a solution under the Subsistence Homestead provision of the National Industrial Recovery Act.¹¹⁴ A new community, Arthurdale, was created; it was “the first of one hundred homestead communities built from the ground up by the federal government during the Great Depression”.¹¹⁵ For ER this was a “humanitarian project and experiment” and with her influence “this New Deal project provided spacious new homes with indoor plumbing, modern appliances, and furniture to a select, lucky few”¹¹⁶

She was successful and visited the new community of Arthurdale so often that she was “photographed square dancing with miners in worn clothes and holding sick children in her lap”.¹¹⁷ During this time ER was finding her stride in the White House; changing it as necessary and doing the emotional labor as First Lady of the people.

¹¹³ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹¹⁴ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹¹⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: National Park Service, Arthurdale: A New Deal Community Experiment, <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/157arthurdale.htm>

¹¹⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: National Park Service, Arthurdale: A New Deal Community Experiment, <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/157arthurdale.htm>

¹¹⁷ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

However, “[f]or politicians and policy commentators, [Arthurdale] was a flashpoint for the great debate over the role of government during an economic crisis.”¹¹⁸

Criticism was harsh. Robert Taft, in 1936 argued, “ The purpose of the New Deal is to abandon the American business and political system for a system tending inevitable to socialism; to abandon democracy and to substitute an autocracy of men for a government of law...For the first time in my lifetime, we have a President who is willing to mislead the people of fundamental questions of finance, who is willing openly to attack the very basis of the system of American democracy, who is willing to let the people believe their problems can be solved and their lives made easier by taking money away from other people or manipulating the currency, who is willing to encourage them to believe that the government owes them a living whether they work or not”¹¹⁹ Although criticism of the New Deal was harsh, ER never wavered in her support of it’s ideals.

Despite the naysayers and critics the New Deal thrived and so did ER. Women in her orbit “thought [of] Eleanor as their spiritual leader - an equal to the President. To some of them she was synonymous with the New Deal and the adulation of her was part of the general approval they had for the direction the New Deal had taken.”¹²⁰ To illustrate this point, Rose Schneiderman - leader of the National Trade Union League, sent a letter to ER in 1936 saying “ I am sure, Eleanor dear, that millions of people

¹¹⁸ Quote: National Park Service, Arthurdale: A New Deal Community Experiment, <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/157arthurdale.htm>

¹¹⁹ Quote: New York Times, January 19, 1936, Reign Of Socialism Is Feared By Taft, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1936/01/19/85208109.html?pageNumber=94>

¹²⁰ Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

voted with you on their minds also”¹²¹. It was during this time that the efforts ER put in throughout the years was starting to show results. She was becoming a force in her own right. During this time the care she had taken of the country was beginning to show.

ER was at once part of the Washington scene and apart from it; she enjoyed a “flexibility and freedom denied even to the president” as she navigated, but was separate from the bureaucracy¹²². This allowed ER to “provide direct assistance to the President for her friends”¹²³ As a matter of fact one of her friends, Molly Dawson, made a comment “When I wanted help of some definite point, Mrs. Roosevelt gave me the opportunity to sit by the President at dinner and the matter was settled before we finished our soup.”¹²⁴ More to the point, Mary Anderson who was Chief of the Women’s Bureau, said

“... during the years of the Roosevelt Administration, I felt much closer to the White House because of Mrs Roosevelt’s interest and friendship. She always knew what we were doing and understood what our problems were. I felt that working women everywhere could turn to her for help and support, and through her could get the kind of sympathetic interest from the President that would be very useful. Women in Washington knew they had a friend in the White House.”

¹²¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²² Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²³ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

During this time ER used her position as the President's wife to help her friends when needed.

In order to facilitate networking among women ER started inviting women who were executives in the administration to dinners and social events at the White House, which up until ER had been mostly for the men in the administration.¹²⁵ Once she understood that the women who attended her events were communicating their concerns to her she started arranging a string of garden parties simply for these women.¹²⁶ These parties became an annual event until 1942, when ER had to end them because of war.¹²⁷ During this time ER empathized and connected with women; listening to their concerns led to solidifying her female network.

ER also had "kind of a "daily network newsletter" called *My Day*, which kept women up to date on her daily activities and who she was spending time with".¹²⁸ It "oftentimes has been critiqued as shallow and trivial, but nevertheless it captured the spirit of a remarkable woman's reaction to her time."¹²⁹ It ran from December 31, 1935 to September 26, 1962 and was a way women to keep in touch with her; Molly Dawson

¹²⁵ Paraphrase: Seeber, Frances M. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²⁶ Paraphrase: Seeber, Frances M. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²⁷ Paraphrase: Seeber, Frances M. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²⁸ Quote: Seeber, Frances M. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹²⁹ Quote: Seeber, Frances M. "Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

said to ER “ I just had to subscribe to...’My Day’ and keep in touch with you.”¹³⁰ All of this work ER did “laid the groundwork for future women and demonstrated to all what women could do.”¹³¹ During this time ER became more emboldened in her communication with women and inspired women in what they could do.

In the 1940’s ER was a rebel and “dared to equate American racism with fascism and argued that to ignore the evils of segregation would be capitulating to Aryanism”¹³² but this perspective had much earlier beginnings. During her first week as First Lady ER decided the White House domestic staff would be employed by all black people and, during the same year, met with West Virginian black miners to “discuss living conditions”¹³³. Her genuine interest and compassion for people of all walks of life was admirable, but it rankled some. In her wake was left a flabbergasted conservative-minded society in Washington and “rumors of ER’s “race-baiting” actions sped across the South “faster than lightning.”¹³⁴ She certainly wasn’t intimidated by rumors nor did she stop being herself.¹³⁵ During this time ER became more aware and morally outraged by racism; it is evident she had had the privilege of not thinking about her own race or how it impacted her life.

¹³⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹³¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Seeber, Frances M. “Eleanor Roosevelt and Women in the New Deal: A Network of Friends.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1990, pp. 707–17.

¹³² Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹³³ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹³⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹³⁵ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

ER did things like take political wives on a “walking tour [of] Washington’s slum alleys to increase support for housing legislation”, touring “the Virgin Islands with Lorena Hickok in 1934”, and “visited Howard University’s Freedman Hospital, [and] lobbied Congress for increased appropriations”.¹³⁶ When *The New Yorker* ran a cartoon depicting two miners saying with undisguised horror, “Here comes Mrs. Roosevelt!”¹³⁷ ER refused to bend to such criticism and wrote an article that ran in *The Saturday Evening Post*, saying “In strange and subtle ways, it was indicated to me that I should feel ashamed of that cartoon, and there was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much. Somehow or the other, most people seem to feel that it was unbecoming in a woman to have a variety of interests. Perhaps that arose from the old inherent theory that woman’s interests must lie only in her home.”¹³⁸ She goes on to say “A little of the right kind of curiosity will endow you with sympathy, and that will bring you the confidence of your fellow human beings.”¹³⁹ During this time, she clearly was able to move about freely, again in part because of her whiteness; although she hit the boundaries of being a woman and felt the backlash from it.

As time wore on and FDR found himself into his second term, ER became ever more passionate about civil rights. She was an advocate for “anti-lynching legislation, served as an active co-chair of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax, spoke out in favor of National Sharecropper’s Week, urged Agricultural Adjustment Act

¹³⁶ Paraphrase and Quotes: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹³⁷ Quote: ER, *Saturday Even Post*, In Defense of Curiosity, Eleanor Roosevelt, August 24, 1935

¹³⁸ Quote: ER, *Saturday Even Post*, In Defense of Curiosity, Eleanor Roosevelt, August 24, 1935

¹³⁹ Quote: ER, *Saturday Even Post*, In Defense of Curiosity, Eleanor Roosevelt, August 24, 1935

administrators to recognize the discriminatory practices of white landowners, pressured FERA administrators to pay black and white workers equal salaries, and invited black guests and entertainers to the White House.”¹⁴⁰ Her work for black minorities continued. In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let Marian Anderson, a famous black contralto, perform at Constitutional Hall.¹⁴¹ The DAR owned the hall in Washington DC; the city was segregated and the hall had a “concert by white artists only” clause.¹⁴² This infuriated ER; she resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution in February 1939 and “announced her decision in her newspaper column, thereby transforming a local act into a national disgrace.”¹⁴³ She asserted on more than one occasion that democracy in the United States could only reign if there was also democracy for black people.¹⁴⁴ During this time she fully embraced her notions of fairness, respect, and what it means to be a democracy.

Indeed, as the Great Depression was finally ending and on the dawn of World War II , during a time when it was not “easy...to extol democracy, its inherent commitment to inclusion, and the possibility of a government grounded in a thoughtful, committed, and diverse community”¹⁴⁵ she challenged the American public to really think about

¹⁴⁰ Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁴¹ Paraphrase: National Marian Anderson Museum, <https://marianandersonhistoricalsociety.weebly.com/biography.html>

¹⁴² Paraphrase and Quote: National Marian Anderson Museum, <https://marianandersonhistoricalsociety.weebly.com/biography.html>

¹⁴³ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁴⁴ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁴⁵ Quote: Allia Black, PhD in her introduction of Roosevelt, Eleanor, The Moral Basis of Democracy,

what democracy meant to them, writing in her 1940 book, *The Moral Basis of Democracy* “At a time when the whole world is in a turmoil and thousands of people are homeless and hungry, it behooves all of us to reconsider our political and religious beliefs in an effort to clarify in our minds the standards by which we live.”¹⁴⁶ She thought, “we have to take an account of just what our condition is; how much Democracy we have and how much we want to have.”¹⁴⁷ She preached democracy and civil morale as much as possible and pragmatically “urged women to work outside the home, particularly in defense industries, and lobbied to have day care centers and take-out kitchens built in factories... supported equal pay for equal work... [and] encouraged volunteerism”¹⁴⁸ During this time ER deeply reflected her morals and sense of going to work for something larger than oneself to the nation.

She was a mound of energy when it came to extolling the virtues of fairness, compassion, and democracy. She also insisted the New Deal reforms continue throughout the war and “pressured FDR’s aides, liberal leaders, and concerned Americans to remember that there was an economic emergency in addition to a military one”.¹⁴⁹ After the 1944 election she defended her stance to FDR and Harry Hopkins, his aid, saying they were “under moral obligation to see his domestic reforms through, particularly the organizing of our domestic life in such a way as to give

¹⁴⁶ ER Quote: Roosevelt, Eleanor, *The Moral Basis of Democracy*,

¹⁴⁷ ER Quote: Roosevelt, Eleanor, *The Moral Basis of Democracy*,

¹⁴⁸ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁴⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

everybody a job.”¹⁵⁰ During this time she became a fully realized force in her own right and had the gumption to go up against FDR regarding his own policies.

On April 12, 1945 FDR died with Lucy Mercer by his side. ER turned to her friends and colleagues for support and within a week she had “coordinated his funeral, responded to friends’ condolences, overseen the boxing of possessions acquired and documents generated during her twelve years in Washington, said goodbye to colleagues and staff, and pondered her future.”¹⁵¹ She made time to “host a farewell White House tea for the women's press corps”; in which she told the ladies that her only ambitions were journalistic from here on out while also “scoffing at various rumors of her own political ambitions”¹⁵² As she left the White House, ER wrote to Hick on April 19th saying “ The upstairs looks desolate and I will be glad to leave tomorrow. It is empty and without purpose to be here now.... Franklin’s death ended a period in history and now in its wake for lots of us who lived in his shadow periods come and we have to start again under own momentum and wonder what we can achieve... I may be a bit weary when we get home tomorrow but I’m so glad you will be at the apartment.”¹⁵³ Weeks after leaving the White House ER was unpacking and came across a portrait of FDR that Mercer’s friend, Elizabeth Schoumatoff, had painted and

¹⁵⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁵¹ Quote and Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁵² Paraphrase and Quotes: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁵³ Quote from letter: <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/eleanor-roosevelt-lorena-hickok-april-19-1945>

“arranged to have it sent to Lucy”.¹⁵⁴ In response Lucy wrote to ER saying “Thank you so very much. You must know that it will be treasured always. I send you - as I find it impossible not to - my love and deep sympathy.”¹⁵⁵ During this time ER lost, what she thought, was the mechanism of her power. It was also a dramatic time of transition for her, although she had finally found it in her heart to forgive or accept FDR’s affair with Mercer.

In the aftermath of FDR’s death, ER struggled to find a direction, knowing if the New Deal policies were to survive and continue she would have to “assist in orchestrating its return”.¹⁵⁶ Over the years she did many things to push her agenda forward; writing her memoirs of her time as First Lady, was part of the Democratic fundraising machine, hosted events celebrating FDR’s accomplishments, and campaigned on behalf of “local, state, and national candidates”.¹⁵⁷ However, it was in December of 1945 when President Harry Truman, only months after FDR died, appointed ER to the United States delegation to the United Nations; writing to ER he said “ You, as a representative of the United States, will bear the grave responsibility of demonstrating the wholehearted support which this Government is pledged to give to the United Nations organization, to the end that the organization can become the means of preserving the international peace and of creating conditions of mutual trust

¹⁵⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Carlson, Peter. “FDR’s Loyal Mistress.” *American History*, vol. 45, no. 5, Dec. 2010, pp. 44–47.

¹⁵⁵ Quote: Carlson, Peter. “FDR’s Loyal Mistress.” *American History*, vol. 45, no. 5, Dec. 2010, pp. 44–47.

¹⁵⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁵⁷ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

and economic and social well-being among all peoples of the world.”¹⁵⁸ Thinking about this time later ER said “I knew that as the only woman, I’d better be better than anybody else. So I read every paper. And they were very dull sometimes, because State Department papers can be very dull.”¹⁵⁹ During this time ER realized her full potential as a political leader.

She was assigned to the UN’s Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee and she worked on an “early Cold War issue, repatriation of displace[d] people, particularly those who feared return to the countries of origin because of their political views”¹⁶⁰ ER rebuffed the the idea that these people were traitors and fought for their rights to stay and not be returned home.¹⁶¹ During this time ER proved herself worthy of dealing with heavy issues.

Her efforts led her to work on “behalf of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)”, in which she helped create “ an atmosphere that permitted blending the ideas and norms of different cultures together in a document nations around the globe could assent to while marshaling US support of swift passage of the declaration by separating it from a legally binding (and more problematic) covenant.”¹⁶² “There was more value in settling on universal standards of morality with essentially a collective nod among states than futilely attempting to codify standards as the world fractured

¹⁵⁸ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁵⁹ Quote: [TIME Magazine](#). 7/6/2009, Vol. 173 Issue 26, p44-46. 3p.

¹⁶⁰ Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁶¹ Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

¹⁶² Paraphrase and Quotes: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/short-biography-eleanor-roosevelt>

into a postcolonial order dominated by the competition between capitalism and communism.”¹⁶³ During this time ER was able to bring the New Deal ideals to the world stage.

Ever the pragmatist, ER was the “first Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights” and, “at a time of increasing East-West tensions”, summoned her gravitas, reputation, and trustworthiness with both the United States and the Soviet Union “to steer the drafting process toward it’s successful completion”.¹⁶⁴ The UDHR “promised equality and freedom to everyone everywhere”¹⁶⁵. “It set out, for the first time, fundamental human right to be universally protected”¹⁶⁶ It’s been credited with paving the way for “more than seventy human rights treaties [and is] applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels”.¹⁶⁷ “The federal courts of the United States have often cited the UDHR to amplify the protection of human rights that are buttressed by binding treaties and U.S. law.”¹⁶⁸ It may not give legal standing to bring human-rights charges in a court of law, but it’s “ a potent instrument of advocacy once

¹⁶³ Quote: Council of Foreign Relations, Reflecting on and Recharging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after Seventy-Five Years, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/reflecting-and-recharging-universal-declaration-human-rights-after-seventy-five-years#:~:text=The UDHR spurred the truly,Economic, Social and Cultural Rights>.

¹⁶⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: United Nations website: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹⁶⁵ Quote: FDR Library <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/udhr75>

¹⁶⁶ Quote: United Nations website: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹⁶⁷ Paraphrase and Quote: United Nations website: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹⁶⁸ Quote: Council of Foreign Relations, Reflecting on and Recharging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after Seventy-Five Years, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/reflecting-and-recharging-universal-declaration-human-rights-after-seventy-five-years#:~:text=The UDHR spurred the truly,Economic, Social and Cultural Rights>.

the victim stands before the judge.”¹⁶⁹ During this time ER used the skills she had gained over the course of her career in this ultimate achievement. Her legacy had been cemented.

On September 28, 1948 in Paris ER “presented the document to the General Assembly and was instrumental in its passage.”¹⁷⁰ In her speech she said “We must not be confused about what freedom is. Basic human rights are simple and easily understood: freedom of speech and a free press; freedom of religion and worship; freedom of assembly and the right of petition; the right of men to be secure in their homes and free from unreasonable search and seizure and from arbitrary arrest and punishment.”¹⁷¹ She spoke about the power of language and how it is used, about the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union, her sympathies with the Russian people, of freedom and what it means, and of free on honest elections.¹⁷² Her passion for human rights ran throughout her speech, saying “Among free men the end cannot justify the means. We know the patterns of totalitarianism—the single political party, the control of schools, press, radio, the arts, the sciences, and the church to support autocratic authority; these are the age-old patterns against which men have struggled for three thousand years. These are the signs of reaction, retreat, and

¹⁶⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Council of Foreign Relations, Reflecting on and Recharging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights after Seventy-Five Years, <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/reflecting-and-recharging-universal-declaration-human-rights-after-seventy-five-years#:~:text=The UDHR spurred the truly,Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.>

¹⁷⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/struggle-human-rights-1948>

¹⁷¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/struggle-human-rights-1948>

¹⁷² Paraphrase: Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/struggle-human-rights-1948>

retrogression. The United Nations must hold fast to the heritage of freedom won by the struggle of its peoples; it must help us to pass it on to generations to come.”¹⁷³ In Paris on December 10, 1948 the UN “adopted the Declaration with Resolution 217 A(III)... by a vote of 48-0 (8 abstaining)”¹⁷⁴. “Mrs. Roosevelt brought a rare combination of toughness, practicality and idealism to the halls of the United Nations. The fact that her lofty objectives were viewed by “realists” as being impossible of attainment did not deter her from fighting for them.”¹⁷⁵ In 1968, ER “ was posthumously awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize”¹⁷⁶ This was her crowning policy achievement. Her defense of democracy mixed with the ideals of fairness, respect, and freedom had been what she had fought for her whole career.

Michelle Obama:

“Even when it’s not pretty or perfect. Even when it’s more real than you want to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.”¹⁷⁷ The White House has been a big part of her story. She said of leaving the White House at the end of her husband’s second term,

¹⁷³ ER Quote Speech to UN Assembly - <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/struggle-human-rights-1948>

¹⁷⁴ Quote: FDR Library <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/udhr75>

¹⁷⁵ Quote: ER Obituary, New York Times, November 8, 1962, Mrs, Roosevelt, First Lady 12 Year, Often Called ‘World’s Most Admired Woman’, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1011.html>

¹⁷⁶ Quote: United Nations website: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

¹⁷⁷ Quote: Winston, Proctor, Cynthia E. “‘It’s Something to Own’: A Psychobiographical Exploration of the Life Story of Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama.” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 91, no. 1, Feb. 2023, pp. 150–64.

“It was a very emotional day. But then we got on Airforce One and when I got on the plane, I think I sobbed for 30 minutes. I think it was just the release of for 8 years just trying do everything perfectly. One day, you are a normal family. An election happens and your life changes instantly. It is like you are shot out of a cannon. We did not have time to, like, adjust. Being the first lady has been the greatest honor of my life. But how many people have been in that position when the entire attention of everything is you? Every gesture you make, every blink of an eye is being analyzed. You have the world watching every move you make. Your life is not yours anymore. The whole idea of doing a tour is having time to reflect. What just happened to me?”¹⁷⁸

Here she owning and reflecting on her own story.

Like ER she was a reluctant First Lady and like ER in order to understand why means we must rewind time. MO graduated from Princeton University in 1985 with a BA Sociology with a minor in African-American Studies and then went on to graduate Havard Law School in 1988.¹⁷⁹ After law school, she became an associate lawyer at Sidney & Austin in Chicago; the work was boring, but she making good money, and one day found herself on autopilot, saying, "I didn't see a whole lot of people who were just thrilled to be there... I met people who thought this was a good life. But were people waking up just bounding out of bed to get to work? No.”¹⁸⁰ During this time MO

¹⁷⁸ Quote: Winston, Proctor, Cynthia E. “‘It’s Something to Own’: A Psychobiographical Exploration of the Life Story of Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama.” Her sources was MO’s book *Becoming*

¹⁷⁹ Paraphrase: Barack Obama Presidential Library <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

¹⁸⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack’s Rock.

had achieved her educational goals, but was disillusioned with the corporate track, which makes her seem like most middle-aged people.

Then, in 1989, MO was assigned to mentor the new guy; she just thought he was “a black guy who can talk straight”, but he impressed her with his confidence, seriousness and commitment.¹⁸¹ MO later said, “One of the things that attracted me to Barack was his emotional honesty. Right off the bat he said what he felt. There are no games with him — he is who he appears to be.”¹⁸² It’s worth noting here she was his boss when they met. During this time MO was falling in love, which is something every does or wants to experience.

Not long after meeting BO a close free-spirited college friend, Suzanne Alele, died and MO mused, “If I died in four months, is this how I would have wanted to spend this time?”¹⁸³ She spent time thinking about this and, as she later reflected, “I started thinking about the fact that I went to some of the best schools in the country and I have no idea what I want to do... That kind of stuff got me worked up because I thought, 'This isn't education. You can make money and have a nice degree. But what are you learning about giving back to the world, and finding your passion and letting that guide you, as opposed to the school you got into'?”¹⁸⁴ Here she’s questioning the track she’d put herself on.

¹⁸¹ Paraphrase and Quote: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack’s Rock.

¹⁸² Quote: [Prevention](#). Nov2009, Vol. 61 Issue 11, p136-141. 6p. 5 Color Photographs

¹⁸³ Paraphrase and Quote: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack’s Rock.

¹⁸⁴ Quote: Paraphrase and Quote: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack’s Rock.

She started reaching out to a variety of different charities and city departments and eventually she got a call back from Valerie Jarrett, then the Deputy Chief of Staff to Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley.¹⁸⁵ Jarrett put MO to work immediately "with businesses caught in red tape between city departments"; it wasn't exciting and there was a pay cut, but MO felt that it was her first step towards public service.¹⁸⁶ Here MO is going through the grind of searching for a new job and taking a pay cut is something many people have to do when they switch careers.

In 1996 MO was tapped to be the Associate Dean of Students at the University of Chicago which led to her becoming the director of the University Community Student Center.¹⁸⁷ That same year BO told *The New Yorker* "I'm extremely happy with her... and part of it has to do with the fact that she is at once familiar to me, so that I can be myself and she knows me very well and I trust her completely but at the same time she is also a complete mystery to me in some ways... it's that tension between familiarity and mystery that makes for something strong, because even as you build a life of trust and comfort and mutual support, you retain some sense of surprise or wonder about the other person."¹⁸⁸ During this time she had found success in her work and success in her marriage.

¹⁸⁵ Paraphrase: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack's Rock.

¹⁸⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack's Rock.

¹⁸⁷ Paraphrase: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

¹⁸⁸ Quote: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

In 1998 MO and BO had their first daughter, Malia, and then 2001 they had their second daughter, Natasha (or as she's called, Sasha).¹⁸⁹ Then in 2002 she was promoted to Director of Community Affairs at the University of Chicago and again in 2005 to Vice President of External Affairs and Community Relations.¹⁹⁰ At this point, MO was a working mother and trying to find a work/life balance was tough. "I had had Malia, Barack was in the U.S. Senate, so I was basically mothering part time on my own, having, I had a full-time job... I tried part time because I thought, I have to figure this out, I have to be able to pick the kids up, I've got to be able to do all this. So I tried part time."¹⁹¹ Continuing her story she said "The only thing I found out from part time was that you just get paid part time.. So I had vowed that if I continued to work, that I would never settle for part time. I knew what my time and energy was worth."¹⁹² During this time MO had babies and became a working mother struggling with work/life balance, which is relatable to most women.

She and BO were focused on family, though, and as MO said when BO was a Senator "Our future is making sure Barack can get to our daughters' ballet recitals and balancing the demands of this current set of responsibilities with our need to build a

¹⁸⁹ Paraphrase: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

¹⁹⁰ Paraphrase: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

¹⁹¹ Quote: Sarai, Esha, Voice of America, Michelle Obama on Striking a Balance Between Job, Motherhood, June 15, 2016

¹⁹² Quote: Sarai, Esha, Voice of America, Michelle Obama on Striking a Balance Between Job, Motherhood, June 15, 2016,

strong family, and that's taking a lot of energy out of us right now."¹⁹³ But as many women do, she also learned to lean on her girlfriends. One of her best friends, Yvonne Davila, said "Michelle and I co-parent our girls, who shared cribs... when she needs a girlfriend to lean on, or when she wants her daughters to sleep over, this is where they go."¹⁹⁴ Finding a work/life balance was important to her and this translated to her time in the White House. During this time family becomes the center of MO's world and, having a husband working away from home, must lean on her friends to help with the kids. This, again, is very relatable to the American public.

In 2008 BO became the 44th President of the United States and the family prepared to move to the White House.¹⁹⁵ A couple of weeks before the inauguration they booked rooms at the Hay-Adams so the girls could start their new semester at Sidwell Friends.¹⁹⁶ "The work-life balance [MO] struggles with is not typical, but the early-days challenges she faces are remarkably ordinary. Getting her bearings, checking out churches to join, helping her kids adjust to unfamiliar surroundings -

¹⁹³ Paraphrase and Quote: Kinnon, Joy Bennett. "Michelle OBAMA: Not Just The Senator's Wife." *Ebony*, vol. 61, no. 5, Mar. 2006, pp. 58–63. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=19951858&site=ehost-live.

¹⁹⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

¹⁹⁵ Paraphrase: White House website: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/barack-obama/>

¹⁹⁶ Paraphrase: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

these are her top priorities and preoccupations.”¹⁹⁷ It’s important that life is normal for her kids; saying “I’m going to try to take them to school every morning - as much as I can... But there’s also a measure of independence. And obviously there will be times I won’t be able to drop them off at all, I like to be a presence in my kids’ school I want to know the teachers; I want to know the other parents.”¹⁹⁸ To ease the girls’ transition an life at the White House MO had her mother, Marian Robinson, move in with them to “keep the kids on an even keel”.¹⁹⁹ During this time MO’s focus is on her family. Focusing on family is safe; politically speaking.

MO’s attitude about the White House is one of “diversity and inclusion”; saying “ We want entertaining in the White House to feel like America, that we are reminded of all the many facets of our culture. The Latino community, the Asian-American community, the African-American community... Hip-hop, spoken word - we want to bring the youth in, for them to hear their voices in this.”²⁰⁰ Here she is deliberately including those voices who have felt a apart from the system, but in a optimistic and light heartened way.

¹⁹⁷ Paraphrase: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

¹⁹⁸ Quote: Paraphrase: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

¹⁹⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Paraphrase: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

²⁰⁰ Paraphrase and Quotes: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

This sense of inclusivity permeated her policy initiatives. One of the things she's most famous for is launching the *Let's Move!* Initiatives in 2009, which "targeted childhood obesity by encouraging kids to participate in physical activity and revamped US school lunches to include more nutritious food options."²⁰¹ In order to illustrate a healthier lifestyle she tore up the South Lawn at the White House and planted a garden; the first since ER's Victory Garden that was planted during World War II.²⁰² "Harvest from the gardens were cooked in the White House kitchen and provided to Miriam's Kitchen, a local organization serving the homeless community in Washington, DC."²⁰³ Here she is delving into policy; this topic is a wholesome issue that all parents face, which makes her seem like a regular mom trying to feed her kids.

MO said the reason food is such a big issue for her is "... The most powerful thing [people] can do for their overall health is feed their bodies good nutritious food - if you don't like the doctor, if you don't like government, if you don't like folks messing with your life, the best thing to do is make sure you're healthy."²⁰⁴ When she talks about the progress of *Let's Move* she says "We're really proud of the changes we've seen across the country - most proud of the fact that it feels like there's a new norm in how families

²⁰¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²⁰² Paraphrase: Barack Obama Presidential Library, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²⁰³ Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²⁰⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: PR Newswire. "In An Exclusive Interview With Cooking Light, First Lady Michelle Obama Talks About The State Of Family Dinner & How She Will Measure The Success Of *Let's Move!*" *PR Newswire US*, 9 Feb. 2015.

think about food and what's healthy."²⁰⁵ Through these programs school lunches changed, people were encouraged to exercise and move as well as cook as a family.²⁰⁶ In 2012 MO wrote a book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*, in which she spoke of the garden and "its inspiring story, from the first planting to the latest harvest"; it allowed space to "hear about her worries as a novice gardener...her struggles and joys as lettuce, corn, tomatoes, collards and kale, sweet potatoes and rhubarb flourished in the freshly tilled soil"²⁰⁷ Here she is empathizing with the struggles families face and encouraging the change she wants to see. She also shows a vulnerability of learning something new, which is relatable.

Moving from feeding families to supporting them, MO helped to establish *Joining Forces*, an initiative "rallying American civilians and their organizations to support US service member and veteran and their families" in 2011 with Mrs. Jill Biden.²⁰⁸ Joining Forces called for a multi-pronged approach; "employment, education, and wellness- for organizing national efforts to provide additional tools to the US military community."²⁰⁹ MO was "determined to use the "wonderful megaphone" she ha[d] as

²⁰⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: PR Newswire. "In An Exclusive Interview With Cooking Light, First Lady Michelle Obama Talks About The State Of Family Dinner & How She Will Measure The Success Of Let's Move!" *PR Newswire US*, 9 Feb. 2015.

²⁰⁶ Paraphrase: PR Newswire. "In An Exclusive Interview With Cooking Light, First Lady Michelle Obama Talks About The State Of Family Dinner & How She Will Measure The Success Of Let's Move!" *PR Newswire US*, 9 Feb. 2015.

²⁰⁷ Paraphrase and Quote: Michelle Obama Books website <https://michelleobamabooks.com/american-grown>

²⁰⁸ Paraphrase and Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²⁰⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

first lady to highlight the plight of military families and encourage Americans to do more to help the people her husband calls "the force behind the force."²¹⁰ The families left behind when service men and women are called away for duty often "face lonely struggles with issues as critical as finding jobs and changing schools to tasks such as mundane as mowing the lawn and shoveling snow."²¹¹ MO wanted to make the invisible visible saying " Unlike our troops, military families don't wear uniforms so we don't always see them".²¹² Here is she caring for military families and calling on the nation to do the same.

Educating children was a top priority for MO. Creating the *Reach Higher* initiative allowed MO to encourage "all American students to aspire to education beyond high school, through training programs, community college, or university."²¹³ *Reach Higher* brings high school students to the White House to talk about "success from people who have already achieved it."²¹⁴ MO also asked that "parents read more to their younger children, urged businesses to offer more summer job opportunities for college students and appealed to foundations to offer more higher education scholarships."²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Quote: Mimi Hall, and Usa Today. "Michelle Obama, Jill Biden Are 'Joining Forces.'" *USA Today*.

²¹¹ Paraphrase and Quote: Mimi Hall, and Usa Today. "Michelle Obama, Jill Biden Are 'Joining Forces.'" *USA Today*.

²¹² Paraphrase and Quote: Mimi Hall, and Usa Today. "Michelle Obama, Jill Biden Are 'Joining Forces.'" *USA Today*.

²¹³ Paraphrase and Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²¹⁴ Paraphrase and Quote: Charlie Rose, and Chip Reid. "Yesterday's Event Was Part of First Lady Michelle Obama's Reach Higher Initiative, Which Brings High School Students Here to the White House to Hear about Success from People Who Have Already Achieved It." *CBS This Morning*.

²¹⁵ Quote: By MICHAEL GRACZYK - Associated Press. "Education Theme for First Lady's San Antonio Trip." *AP Top News Package*, Associated Press DBA Press Association, 2 May 2014.

Here MO is caring and encouraging students and asking the community to support them.

Expanding her educational dreams for students, MO started the *Let Girls Learn* initiative; which “drew together resources from the US Department of State, US Agency for International Development, Peace Corps, Millennium Challenge Corporation, and US President’s Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to empower young girls across the world to secure a quality education.”²¹⁶ Here MO shows that her initiative has broad support; the support allows for a politically safe initiative.

It wasn’t only the bi-partisan initiatives that made MO seem relatable, it’s how she is. MO “come[s] across so normal” in part because she is “direct and plain-spoken, with an edgy sense of humor uncommon in a political spouse”.²¹⁷ She’s approachable and has a “sincere and friendly embrace” and “when she talks to you, she focuses all her calm attention on your face”.²¹⁸ But it is also in the ways in which she speaks to women and what she speaks about; she speaks about health, family, relationships, and work. Here MO is seen as caring, kind, and funny; which are all seen as desirable traits to have.

She says of being First Lady there’s “... a ton of stuff I do that I’ve never seen another First Lady do. But I’ve got to do what is comfortable for me. That helps me connect to people, because if I’m being the **Michelle** I know, that I can sustain. All that

²¹⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Barack Obama Presidential Library: <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/obamas/first-lady-michelle-obama>

²¹⁷ Quotes: [Newsweek](#). 2/25/2008, Vol. 151 Issue 8, p26-33. 8p. 7 Color Photographs, 4 Black and White Photographs, Barack’s Rock.

²¹⁸ Paraphrase and Quotes: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fashion-features-power-change-leading-lady/docview/897877148/se-2>

stuff you see--jumping jacks with 500 kids or double Dutching--is my real personality: Let's give it a shot, let's be silly. I'm always teasing my girls; it loosens them up to try new things. If they see me making a fool of myself, they can laugh and focus less on their own insecurities.”²¹⁹ MO’s “view of life is that it has to be fun, and you have to choose the fun in it. We keep things light in the East Wing. And we have the coolest events. I mean, I'm going to be playing soccer with SpongeBob soon! There's an e-mail chain in Presidential records about whether or not SpongeBob could actually hold a [tennis] racket in his arms; because he cannot, we will play soccer. Those are my e-mails. (Laughter)”²²⁰ “Whether dancing barefoot in the East Room or sitting cross-legged on the floor of the school gym”, Vallerie Jarrett, MO’s longtime mentor and friend, said “Michelle has never wanted to be a First Lady out of reach to real people... She knows who she is and how to enjoy life”²²¹ Here MO is showing the nation a lighter, more silly, side of herself.

She’s more focused on her children and her family than she is on politics and this is sprinkled throughout everything she says. “You know, happiness for me really is when my kids are good and when my family is whole. Moving [to the White House], whatever stresses would be on my husband and me, we could handle; we are grown-ups. But it wouldn't be until the day that my kids came home and said to me, "I like it here," that I'd feel like I could breathe and know that we're all going to be okay here.

²¹⁹ Quote: Westfall, Sandra Sobieraj. “I’ve Got To Be Me.” *People*, vol. 77, no. 23, June 2012, pp. 94–98

²²⁰ Quote: Ellis, Rosemary. “GH Talks with...MICHELLE OBAMA.” *Good Housekeeping*, vol. 255, no. 5, Nov. 2012, pp. 80–85.

²²¹ Paraphrase and Quotes: “Michelle Obama at 50.” *People*, vol. 81, no. 3, Jan. 2014, p. 58.

And that happened very early into the year. My happiness is measured against theirs — when they're in a good place, I feel really good.”²²² Collectively, this makes her a real woman who is confident enough to speak honestly about herself and her life. Here Mo is centering her children in her life, which makes her sound like a regular mom.

MO’s “... message to women is be healthy. I make sure that I am up on my checkups. I have never missed a mammogram or a pap smear. I've had a colonoscopy. I don't obsess about what I eat, but I do make sure that I'm eating vegetables and fruit. And as everyone knows, I do exercise.”²²³ MO says she tries “... to have no absolute nos. I love french fries, I like a good burger, and I like pie. And that's okay. I would be depressed if I felt I could never eat the things that I love. I also don't want my girls to be obsessed about food. We don't have a "no junk food" rule — I just want them to think about their choices. When my older daughter asks, "Can I have pie?" I'll say, "Did you have it yesterday? Well, what do you think?" And she'll come to the conclusion that, you know, you're right, I shouldn't eat pie every night.”²²⁴ When asked what good health looks like for her MO said “It's multifaceted — it's physical, it's internal, it's my diet, and my emotional state. It's all tied in together. Throughout my life, I've learned to make choices that make me happy and make sense for me. Even my husband is happier when I'm happy. He has always said, "You figure out what you want to do," because he's discovered that personal happiness is connected to everything. So I have freed myself to put me on the priority list and say, yes, I can make choices that make

²²² Quote: Vaccariello, Liz. “MICHELLE OBAMA. (Cover Story).” *Prevention*, vol. 61, no. 11, Nov. 2009, pp. 136–41.

²²³ Quote: “Michelle Obama at 50.” *People*, vol. 81, no. 3, Jan. 2014, p. 58.

²²⁴ Quote: Vaccariello, Liz. “MICHELLE OBAMA. (Cover Story).” *Prevention*, vol. 61, no. 11, Nov. 2009, pp. 136–41.

me happy, and it will ripple and benefit my kids, my husband, and my physical health. That's hard for women to own; we're not taught to do that. It's a lesson that I want to teach my girls so they don't wait for their "aha" moment until they're in their 30s like I was (laughs). Maybe they can experience it a little earlier."²²⁵ Here MO is empathizing with the struggle women have; it allows women to see themselves in her.

She talks about her own "aha" moment saying "I've always been a closet jock, but when I got married and had kids, that fell by the wayside. My "aha" moment came when our first daughter, Malia, was 4 months old. My husband's exercise routine hadn't changed a bit; he was still getting his workouts in, and I was getting irritated (laughs). Then I realized he was just prioritizing it differently. So I said, "If I get up and out before the first feeding, I will work out." That will engage my husband to do that first feeding with the baby. So I started getting up at 4:30 in the morning and going to the gym. With exercising, the more you do it, the more you get into it. And the more you see results, the more you're pushing for the next level. That's when it just clicked for me."²²⁶ She talks to her girlfriends about health issues; when asked if menopause is a topic "Oh, yes. Because I have friends in varying stages of it now, as my friends move into their 50s and 60s, that's a topic—what that feels like, do you take hormones, and what are the pros and cons of that. I talk to my mom. She's like, "Menopause? Yeah, I think I went through it." It's like, "I'm sure you did, Mom." [Laughs]"²²⁷ Here she

²²⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: Vaccariello, Liz. "MICHELLE OBAMA. (Cover Story)." *Prevention*, vol. 61, no. 11, Nov. 2009, pp. 136–41.

²²⁶ Paraphrase and Quote: Vaccariello, Liz. "MICHELLE OBAMA. (Cover Story)." *Prevention*, vol. 61, no. 11, Nov. 2009, pp. 136–41.

²²⁷ Paraphrase and quote: "Michelle Obama at 50." *People*, vol. 81, no. 3, Jan. 2014, p. 58.

is being vulnerable as she talks about her struggles and how she overcame them; this inspires women.

When she was asked about any relationship rules her and BO have she replied “Yes. Don't hold on to things. It's a version of "don't go to bed mad," but when you're busy--I may not even see him before I stop being mad, so I'm going to sleep! But the thing we practice is, don't stay mad for too long. When I tell Barack what's bothering me, it's usually the feeling of "you don't love me," and it's like, well, no, actually he adores me. That's what we miss when we don't talk.”²²⁸ Continuing on, when asked if they schedule time she says “No. We live above the store, which means 6:30 p.m. is dinner. The first half hour, we're talking to the girls, then we shoo them off to go walk Bo and catch a little check-in without the kids. [And] we have a ritual where he tucks me in, because I'm usually in bed before anybody. He'll come and turn the lights out and give me a kiss, and we'll talk. He's like, Ready to be tucked? I'm like, Yes, I am.”²²⁹ Here MO talks about her relationship in regular real life terms, which makes her relationship seem like a normal one.

MO was asked about the way BO looks at her as “if you're the most beautiful woman on the planet” and if she sees that and she replied “One of the things that attracted me to Barack was his emotional honesty. Right off the bat he said what he felt. There are no games with him — he is who he appears to be. I feel fortunate as a woman to have a husband who loves me and shows me in every way. So yes, I do

²²⁸ Paraphrase and Quote: Westfall, Sandra Sobieraj. “I've Got To Be Me.” *People*, vol. 77, no. 23, June 2012, pp. 94–98

²²⁹ Paraphrase and Quote: Westfall, Sandra Sobieraj. “I've Got To Be Me.” *People*, vol. 77, no. 23, June 2012, pp. 94–98

know that. And now he'll know I know.”²³⁰ Here, again, MO is speaking about what women care about and manages to add a little humor. This makes her seem relatable.

Through her BO seems more relatable too. MO was asked if BO sings to her and she said ““All the time. Around the house. Yes, oh yes. Sometimes I can't get him to stop singing. He loves it in the shower in the morning, sings to the kids. But it's not a song. He'll sing one line of something romantic or cute. Oh yes.”²³¹ “You can tell from the way Michelle teases Barack in interviews, the way she’s not afraid to disagree publicly, that although she loves her husband, she isn’t in awe of him... They have maintained their autonomy and mutual respect yet clearly delight in each other’s company”²³² MO talks about keeping BO grounded “When you come home from a hard day at work, and you're sitting around the table with two or three very talkative females, and you try to go into your day, and there's a little one that says, "OK, that's nice, Daddy, but let me tell you what we had for lunch at school." And then the other one goes into a long conversation about a funny joke that a friend told. You can see him realizing that they couldn't care less!”²³³ But she also says that “I think Barack and I have built a life together that is full of play. Over the course of our relationship, he's really helped me not to worry so much. That is more his spirit than mine, though people

²³⁰ Paraphrase and Quote: Vaccariello, Liz. “MICHELLE OBAMA. (Cover Story).” *Prevention*, vol. 61, no. 11, Nov. 2009, pp. 136–41.

²³¹ Quote: Westfall, Sandra Sobieraj. “‘I’ve Got To Be Me.’” *People*, vol. 77, no. 23, June 2012, pp. 94–98

²³² Quote: Andre, L. T. (2009, Mar 01). Fashion & features: Power of change: Leading lady. *Vogue*, 199, 428-428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 504.

²³³ Quote: “Michelle Obama Is Finally at Home.” *Good Housekeeping*, vol. 250, no. 5, May 2010, pp. 162–247.

think he's the stuffy one.”²³⁴ When MO was asked how they stay connected she replied “We work out together every day. I usually get up to the gym a little before he does, because I start my day a bit earlier--[I have] hair, makeup, things that he doesn't have to do. I continue to remind him of that. He usually gets up there when I'm halfway through, so we spend the morning checking in, watching SportsCenter. And on the weekends we'll catch a movie together, have a quiet dinner.”²³⁵ Here MO projects a sense of familiarity among women kindly laughing and teasing their husbands. This make both MO and BO more relatable and normal people.

²³⁴ Quote: Ellis, Rosemary. “GH Talks with...MICHELLE OBAMA.” *Good Housekeeping*, vol. 255, no. 5, Nov. 2012, pp. 80–85.

²³⁵ Paraphrase and Quote: Ellis, Rosemary. “GH Talks with...MICHELLE OBAMA.” *Good Housekeeping*, vol. 255, no. 5, Nov. 2012, pp. 80–85.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through the evidence collected on ER and MO there are both similarities and differences in how they were able to use the office of the White House to care and provide the emotional labor the nation needed during their tours as First Lady.

They both were able to speak to women of their time in a language and a way that made a difference of how average women saw themselves.

ER was all about doing in order to take care of one another, so when a young girl wrote²³⁶ to her in May of 1941 asking what she could do to help the nation ER told her to do community service. The interesting thing about how ER spoke was that she couched community service in terms that someone growing up during a time of war and economic hardship would relate to; training in a hospital, home economic courses, cooking for the younger children. She spoke about democracy and, in an emergency, that everyone should be willing to serve as needed. Through her words she empowered a young woman to go out and do something. There are many letters that are similar to this young lady asking ER all sorts of different questions that range from politics to how many children she thought people should have.

MO was all about creating connection through sharing normal everyday experiences that everyone has. It's interesting to note that these are usually personal stories. She shares what it was like when she had two young girls at home, her husband was working away from home, and she was trying to work. It wasn't only working mothers that she reached with this story. Single mothers, family caretakers, and working fathers could also connect to her very relatable story. She's spoken many

²³⁶ May 1941, If You Ask Me column, Defense and Girls

times about eating healthy and exercising, which is something most everyone struggles with; especially if they have kids, jobs, and adult responsibilities. She, more than any other First Lady in decades, was able to tap into how real people live their lives and show that she lives the same way.

Both ER and MO were able to shoulder the emotional labor of healing by showing empathy, grace, and acceptance.

ER showed empathy when she resigned from the DAR, when she sat with poverty stricken communities, and when hosted tea parties for women to share their concerns. Her empathy showed in her political interests and how hard she fought for the four freedoms of the New Deal; freedom of speech, worship, want, and from fear. Again, she was all about doing, so the way she showed care was deployed by actions.

MO was able to shoulder the emotional labor by allowing the American public to see her laugh, have fun, and be silly. She went on late night talk shows, did skits with Jimmy Fallon, and, at one point, was on Sesame Street. This allowed people to see themselves in her and find a sense of playfulness during a very uncertain time. However, as America's first black First Lady, MO needed to trend towards a the traditional First Lady role. She could not delve too much into her husband's political job or she would face severe backlash. It is interesting to note that she only headlined three policy initiatives and all three were centered around family. By positioning herself above the political fray she was able to achieve connection across a broad spectrum of the population.

During ER's time the patriarchal system has a much tighter hold on society than it did in MO's time.

ER's flaunted many conventional traditions, but ultimately had to bow to FDR's will. For example, this is evidenced by her lack of a serious policy position in his administration after she made her expressed wishes clear to him. It was also in the small details. A man accompanied her to visit the Bonus Marchers, even though she was sent in alone; meaning she had a white man's protection as she walked through the camp. She fought back against patriarchy when she started having all women press conferences and refused to let men in. She fought back by insisting on having a policy position and not backing down.

MO faced a different patriarchal society. By the time she became First Lady women had gained many rights, but patriarchy is embedded in her story. MO was the main caretaker of their children; child care, picking the kids up from school, and dealing with the daily events of parenting all fell to her while BO was focused on his career. At the point she was needed in BO's first presidential campaign, she took a leave of absence from work to focus her attention on his career. Her story revolves around family and family issues, while her husband's story is centered elsewhere.

Both women took wildly different paths, but still found themselves embodying similar ideals caring for the nation. They deployed different strategies for their times, but ultimately both were a reminder and a catalyst for women to be more - to take charge of their own lives in bold ways.

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