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Eleanor Roosevelt, 1884-1962: She Was the Most Influential Wife of Any American President

STEVE EMBER: I'm Steve Ember.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: And I'm Shirley Griffith with People in America in VOA Special English. Today, we tell about the woman who was the most influential wife of any American president, Eleanor Roosevelt.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Eleanor Roosevelt was the wife of America's thirty-second president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She helped her husband in many ways during his long political life. She also became one of the most influential people in America. She fought for equal rights for all people -- workers, women, poor people, black people. And she sought peace among nations.

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born in New York City in eighteen eighty-four. Eleanor's family had great wealth and influence. But Eleanor did not have a happy childhood. Her mother was sick and nervous. Her father did not work. He drank too much alcohol. He was not like his older brother, Theodore Roosevelt, who was later elected president. When Eleanor was eight years old, her mother died. Two years later, her father died. Eleanor's grandmother raised the Roosevelt children. Eleanor remembered that as a child, her greatest happiness came from helping others.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: In the early nineteen hundreds, many people were concerned about the problems of poor people who came to America in search of a better life. Eleanor Roosevelt could not understand how people lived in such poor conditions while she and others had so much wealth.

After she finished school, Eleanor began teaching children to read in one of the poorest areas of New York City, called "Hell's Kitchen." She investigated factories where workers were said to be badly treated. She saw little children of four and five years old working until they dropped to the floor. She became involved with other women who shared the same ideas about improving social conditions.

Franklin Roosevelt began visiting Eleanor. Franklin belonged to another part of the Roosevelt family. Franklin and Eleanor were married in nineteen-oh-five. In

the next eleven years, they had six children.

STEVE EMBER: Franklin Roosevelt began his life in politics in New York. He was elected to be a state legislator. Later, President Woodrow Wilson appointed him to be assistant secretary of the Navy. The Roosevelts moved to Washington in nineteen thirteen.

It was there, after thirteen years of marriage, that Eleanor Roosevelt went through one of the hardest periods of her life. She discovered that her husband had fallen in love with another woman. She wanted to end the marriage. But her husband urged her to remain his wife. She did. Yet her relationship with her husband changed. She decided she would no longer play the part of a politician's wife. Instead, she began to build a life with interests of her own.

In nineteen twenty-one, Franklin Roosevelt was struck by the terrible disease polio. He would never walk again without help. His political life seemed over, but his wife helped him return to politics. He was elected governor of New York two times.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Eleanor Roosevelt learned about politics and became involved in issues and groups that interested her. In nineteen twenty-two, she became part of the Women's Trade Union League. She also joined the debate about ways to stop war. In those years after World War One, she argued that America must be involved in the world to prevent another war.

"Peace is the question of the hour," she once told a group of women. "Women must work for peace to keep from losing their loved ones."

The question of war and peace was forgotten as the United States entered a severe economic depression in nineteen twenty-nine. Prices suddenly dropped on the New York stock market. Banks lost their money. People lost their jobs.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in nineteen thirty-two. He promised to end the Depression and put Americans back to work.

Mrs. Roosevelt helped her husband by spreading information about his new economic program. It was called the New Deal. She traveled around the country giving speeches and visiting areas that needed economic aid.

Mrs. Roosevelt was different from the wives of earlier presidents. She was the

first to become active in political and social issues. While her husband was president, Mrs. Roosevelt held more than three hundred news conferences for female reporters. She wrote a daily newspaper commentary. She wrote for many magazines. These activities helped spread her ideas to all Americans and showed that women had important things to say.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: One issue Mrs. Roosevelt became involved in was equal rights for black Americans. She met publicly with black leaders to hear their problems. Few American politicians did this during the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties. One incident involving Mrs. Roosevelt became international news. In nineteen thirty-nine, an American singer, Marian Anderson, planned a performance at Constitution Hall in Washington. But a conservative women's group refused to permit her to sing there because she was black.

STEVE EMBER: Mrs. Roosevelt was a member of that organization, the Daughters of the American Revolution. She publicly resigned her membership to protest the action of the group. An opinion study showed that most Americans thought she was right. Eleanor Roosevelt helped the performance to be held outdoors, around the Lincoln Memorial.

More than seventy thousand people heard Marian Anderson sing.

Mrs. Roosevelt was always considered one of the strongest supporters of the civil rights movement.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: The United States was forced to enter World War Two when Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in nineteen forty-one.

Mrs. Roosevelt made many speeches over the radio praising the soldiers she saw on her travels. She called on people to urge their government to work for peace after the war was over.

Franklin Roosevelt died in nineteen forty-five, soon after he was elected to a fourth term as president. When his wife heard the news she said: "I am more sorry for the people of this country than I am for myself."

STEVE EMBER: Harry Truman became president after Franklin Roosevelt died. World War Two ended a few months later. The leaders of the world recognized the need for peace. So they joined together to form the United Nations. President Truman appointed Mrs. Roosevelt as a delegate to the first meeting of the UN. A newspaper wrote at the time: "Mrs. Roosevelt, better than any other person, can best represent the little people of America, or even the world."

Later, Mrs. Roosevelt was elected chairman of the U.N. Human Rights

Commission. She helped write a resolution called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That declaration became an accepted part of international law.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Mrs. Roosevelt spent the last years of her life visiting foreign countries. She became America's unofficial ambassador. She returned home troubled by what she saw. She recognized that the needs of the developing world were great. She called on Americans to help the people in developing countries.

A few years before she died, Eleanor Roosevelt spoke about what she believed in life. This is what she said:

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: "This life always seems to me to be a continuing process of education and development. What we are preparing for, none of us can be sure. But, that we must do our best while we are here and develop all our capacities is absolutely certain. We face whatever we have to face in this life. And if we do it bravely and sincerely, we're probably accomplishing that growth which we were put here to accomplish."

STEVE EMBER: Eleanor Roosevelt gave the best she had all through her life. People around the world recognized their loss when she died in nineteen sixty-two.

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SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: This program was written by Shelley Gollust. It was produced by Lawan Davis. Our studio engineer was Kevin Fowler. I'm Shirley Griffith.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. Join us again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.