



The True Meaning of Democracy: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson, and Respect

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1932 and was elected to an unprecedented four terms due to the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. African Americans made up an important block of Democratic voters called the “New Deal Coalition.” Blacks switched their electoral allegiance from the Republican “Party of Lincoln,” who they had been voting for in honor of the Emancipation Proclamation, to the party of FDR.

President Roosevelt had a somewhat mixed record on race relations. He refused to support an anti-lynching bill in Congress, where much of his party’s strength was comprised of Southern Democrats. Moreover, the New Deal programs had many instances of discriminating against African Americans in the distribution of relief. Nevertheless, many black sharecroppers were devastated by the Great Depression and welcomed the desperately needed aid. They felt they had a champion in the White House.

African Americans also felt as if they had another champion in the White House in First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt had long been a crusader for the equal rights of workers, women, and blacks. In 1939, she took one of her most decisive and symbolically important stands for the equal rights of African Americans when singer Marian Anderson was refused an opportunity to perform because of her skin color. Roosevelt showed great respect for Ms. Anderson and for the rights of African Americans in general.

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In January, 1939, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had a decision to make. An African-American singer she knew was denied an opportunity to perform at an event in Washington D.C. because of her race. Mrs. Roosevelt and her husband were known for their advocacy for justice toward the dispossessed during the Great Depression. On the other hand, the controversy was sensitive and could have negative political consequences for the administration, especially among southern members of their Democratic Party. Eleanor decided to make a stand for respect and the singer’s equal rights.

Marian Anderson was a world-renowned vocalist who had entertained heads of state all over the world. Arturo Toscanini, the famous Italian conductor, once told her, “A voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years.” She had just accepted an invitation to sing for an annual Howard University fundraiser on Easter weekend. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to rent its Constitution Hall auditorium in Washington, D.C. for the show because Anderson was black. Anderson told the newspapers, “I am shocked beyond

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words to be barred from the capital of my own country after having appeared almost in every other capital in the world.”

Eleanor Roosevelt decided to take several public actions on behalf of Anderson. First, she invited Anderson to sing for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at the White House. Second, she helped arrange a concert for Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. Third, and most importantly, she resigned from the DAR.

On February 28, millions of people across the country opened up their morning newspapers over their breakfast and coffee. Mrs. Roosevelt’s syndicated regular column, “My Day,” appeared in dozens of major newspapers. On this morning, readers were shocked to see Roosevelt resign from the DAR in protest of how the organization was treating Anderson. Mrs. Roosevelt wrote generally of the dilemma of staying in an organization with a policy that a member opposed versus remaining in the organization and attempting to change the policy. She concluded by stating, “They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.”

Most Americans responded favorably and supported Roosevelt. She received more supportive mail than for any other column that year. A Gallup poll showed that more than two-thirds of respondents approved of her action. Anderson was very thankful to Roosevelt for defending her dignity and that of all African Americans, stating, “I am not surprised at Mrs. Roosevelt’s actions because she seems to me to be one who really comprehends the true meaning of democracy.”

On Easter Sunday, April 9, thousands of Americans left their church services and went to the Lincoln Memorial to line up at least four hours early for a good spot to watch Anderson’s special concert. A radio announcer thought it “fitting and symbolic” that she “should be singing on Easter Sunday on the steps to the Memorial to the Great Emancipator who struck the shackles of slavery from her people 76 years ago.” At 5:00 p.m., the concert started. As Anderson looked out from the steps of the memorial, she saw 75,000 people from the steps of the memorial to either side of the reflecting pool and the Washington Monument looming in the distance.

She sang “America” with special significance that day and then “Ave Maria” to commemorate Easter and a few black spirituals. She told the audience, “I’m just so overwhelmed today, I cannot express myself. You don’t know what you have done for me.” The audience was comprised of white and black people, dignitaries and common citizens, and thought the performance was brilliant. Anderson later said it “was more than a concert for me. It was a dedication . . . It seemed everyone present was a living witness to the ideals of freedom for which President Lincoln died. When I sang that day, I was singing to the entire nation.” In defending respect for all Americans of every race, Roosevelt encouraged many to reflect on the meaning of the idea of America. She was at the Roosevelt home at Hyde Park for the Easter weekend, not because she lacked the courage to appear with

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Anderson, but because the First Lady tried humbly not to divert the attention away from the singer's moment.

A few months later, on Independence Day weekend, Roosevelt courageously continued to demonstrate respect for Anderson publicly. Roosevelt traveled to Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) national convention. At the 5,300-seat Richmond Mosque, Roosevelt presented an address that was broadcast across America on NBC radio and its affiliates. The First Lady spoke generally about the challenges that African Americans faced. She concluded her speech by praising Anderson for developing “herself as an individual” as well as having “the courage to meet many difficulties [with] great dignity.”

For several critical months in 1939, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt became a champion of the rights of Marian Anderson, and the greater African American community in the United States. When Anderson's dignity was denigrated, Roosevelt symbolically stood by her side and honored the vocalist's talents and rights as a fellow American, regardless of race.