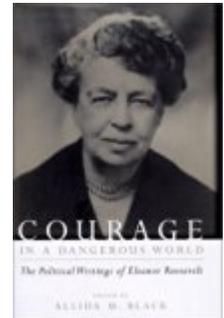


Allida M. Black, ed.. *Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xiv + 362 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11180-5.



Reviewed by Janice M. Leone

Published on H-Pol (September, 1999)

When asked to identify famous American women of the twentieth century, students in American history survey classes invariably name Eleanor Roosevelt along with perhaps Amelia Earhart. Although few, if any, of these students have likely read any of ER's writing, they nonetheless recognize her as playing an important role in twentieth century events especially during the 1930s when she is often described as being the eyes and ears for her husband Franklin as she traveled the country. But as Allida M. Black's edited collection of Eleanor Roosevelt's political writings clearly shows, ER was much more than an appendage to FDR.

As we learn from Black's introduction to this work, there are reasons why few of today's students have read ER's words. Only her autobiography remains in print, and as Black notes, her other words "are confined to the Roosevelt Archives in Hyde Park" (p. 1). Describing ER's extensive work, Black notes that ER wrote "four autobiographies, seven monographs, seven children's books, and more than 550 articles. She delivered more than fifty speeches a year for more than thirty

years. In February 1933, she began a monthly column which existed in a variety of forms until her death in November 1962. On December 30, 1935, she began 'My Day,' a 500-word column published five days a week, which ran continuously until September 27, 1962. And she wrote more than 100,000 letters."(p. 2)

Black's edited work focuses on only one aspect of ER's voluminous work, her political writings. Divided into six sections, *Courage in a Dangerous World* is a mixed collection of ninety-nine of ER's newspaper columns, state department reports, letters, magazine articles, United Nations writings, and speeches arranged chronologically to allow readers "to reconstruct her politics" (p. 5). With the exclusion of the "My Day" columns, Black's anthology includes a comprehensive bibliography of ER's articles, an extensive index, and an introduction in which she briefly outlines the major themes in each section. From ER's massive volume of writings, Black has selected works that reflect ER's roles as journalist, politician, activist, diplomat, and educator. Black clearly intends these writings as samples of ER's thoughts on

democracy and the threats to it whether they were fascism, communism, citizen indifference, racial and ethnic discrimination, unemployment, or general ignorance.

Section I, "The New Deal Years: 1933-1940," contains eighteen selections that introduce the reader to ER's wide-ranging interests and concerns. In 1933 ER issued an invitation to readers of *Woman's Home Companion* to write to her with their problems and joys. In these first selections ER reminded the American people that they themselves could solve the country's problems with programs that included self-help cooperatives and subsistence farms. But the government also had an obligation to citizens to support programs such as old-age pensions and the arts. ER addressed the issue of race relations in her response to the DAR's refusal to allow Marian Anderson to appear in their performance hall. In a speech before the Urban League she condemned lynching but still advocated education for black Americans as the solution to racial problems. In the longest selection in this section, "The Moral Basis of Democracy," ER outlined what democracy meant to her, hoping to stimulate her readers to decide for themselves what democracy meant to them and to determine what sacrifices they would make to insure its success. Printed in 1940, "The Moral Basis" is clearly ER's response to the previous years of economic instability in the United States and the growing threat of fascism on the world scene.

Both ER's pacifism and practicality are evident in Part II, "The Threat of War: 1935-1945." The section begins with ER's suggestions for avoiding war that range from a restructured League of Nations to her advocacy of brotherly love. Yet by 1939, in response to the cash and carry policy, ER argued that until Hitler agreed to reduce armaments, the United States was certainly justified in selling planes to France as a protective measure. In a 1941 "My Day" column, ER made it clear that although she wanted the United States to stay out of war, she understood the complexity

of the situation, and "to ensure an independent U.S.A." the choice to avoid war might no longer exist. ER was able to modify one of her most cherished beliefs in the face of growing world-wide militarism.

As Black clearly shows in Part III, "The Home Front: 1939-1945," ER's concern for the preservation of democracy continued with her writings focused here on the domestic front and what she viewed as the growing intolerance for racial, religious, ethnic, and political diversity among United States residents. ER's solution to prejudice included better education and an improved economic situation. Even as the United States moved closer to war, ER saw no reason to put domestic social issues on hold. As she wrote in 1941, "If you ask me if I want to merely 'maintain' under the defense program, gains we have made in various lines of social service to the country in the last few years--or of social justice--I will say that I will not be satisfied just to maintain these gains. I feel that we still have many things to do before we can even begin to feel that we are really a democracy" (p. 133). Just as ER often expressed regret over the failure of the League of Nations and the reluctance of the United States to involve itself in the World Court, even in her comments on FDR's death she appeared to lay the groundwork for support of the future United Nations. In the final selection of Part III, ER suggested that although FDR died before solving the problems of war "so that eventually an organization might be built to prevent future wars" (p. 148), the American people should continue to pursue his objectives, likely a reference to the United Nations.

Realizing her commitment to such an organization, Harry Truman appointed ER to the first American delegation to the United Nations shortly after World War II. In her position as United States representative to the Social, Humanitarian and Culture Committee of the General Assembly she was instrumental in writing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The selections that

Black includes in Part IV, "The United Nations and Human Rights: 1945-1953" reveal ER's efforts not only to insure rights for all people but also the important role she expected the United Nations to play in protecting those rights. We see ER in her role as a skilled, although sometimes impatient, diplomat and negotiator. Her response to President Eisenhower's rejection of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights shows her impatience with "high sounding phrases" (p. 190) that failed to implement any concrete action or plan for achieving human rights and freedom.

Black has included selections in Part V, "The Cold War Abroad: 1945-1963," that evidence ER's board interests in global events following the end of World War II. Her articles and essays deal here with Russia's handling of Poland, the early years of the Korean War, Arab-Israeli problems, communism's appeal to India, Tito's leadership in Yugoslavia, and the Bay of Pigs. Throughout all of these selections, it is clear that ER viewed Russia as the obstacle to world peace and freedom; yet she was just as adamant by 1959 that United States foreign policy, including the dominant containment policy, had been unsuccessful. As she noted, "What remains lacking is a leader with imagination great enough to see the convergence of our national interest with world welfare defined in terms of peace, autonomy, prosperity, and democracy, and who possesses the leadership ability to translate his vision into concrete policies that will carry the support of the people" (p. 221). Obviously, ER was not hesitant to criticize the republican administration of the previous eight years.

"The Cold War at Home: 1945-1963," the final and longest section in the book, offers some of the most compelling and wide-ranging articles in the entire collection. ER's letter to Harry Truman dated shortly after he became president listed several suggestions for "setting our own house in order" (p. 233). And here Black has included Truman's polite but rather cold reply, even as he ex-

pressed the hope that ER would continue to write to him "from time to time" (p. 234). In many of the selections ER responded to Americans' fear of the spread of communism within the United States. In condemning the Taft-Hartley Act because she believed it would tie the hands of the National Labor Relations Board, ER nevertheless advocated the removal of any union leaders with communist sympathies. Yet she also opposed government loyalty oaths, indicating they reflected a lack of confidence in the American people. As she responded bluntly, "I can imagine nothing stupider than to believe that the mass of people of this country would really find Communism a greater advantage to them than our own democratic system"(p. 219). And although she described the House Committee on Un-American Activities as "better for a police state than for the U.S.A." (p. 244), she still chastised Hollywood producers for being "so chicken-hearted about speaking up for the freedom of their industry"(p. 241).

What adds to the interest in this section is Black's inclusion of several responses to ER letters and columns. Francis Cardinal Spellman attacked ER for her supposed anti-Catholicism in opposing Federal aid to parochial schools. Arthur Grafflin wrote to ER accusing both her and Franklin of fostering treason in the country because ER had not condemned Alger Hiss outright as a traitor. Her letter to Lyndon Johnson in which she discussed the weakness of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 resulted from her continual concern by this time with civil rights, and evoked a response from him. Finally, we see ER coming to terms with the 1960 presidential nomination of John Kennedy. As she made clear, she would have preferred an Adlai Stevenson/John Kennedy ticket, and it took a personal meeting with JFK to bring her around to campaigning for him. Even in her final years, ER maintained her political influence. Black maintains that FDR's death freed ER to speak her mind on many issues, and in these final two sections of

the book, Black provides convincing evidence that ER did indeed speak out.

When reading an anthology of selected writings, it is tempting to contemplate whether the omitted works would have changed the reader's overall evaluation of the author. Black's selections, however, present a fairly consistent picture of ER. Although her evolving position on pacifism and war, along with her growing awareness over the years of the plight of African Americans, are evidence that ER was anything but static in her thinking, Black has succeeded in choosing writings that portray ER as a woman devoted to democracy and freedom for all people. ER's wholehearted belief in the need to preserve democracy and freedom through education, protection of human and civil rights, citizen participation, communication, tolerance of diversity, and courage runs throughout these selections. Black's edited work moves ER far beyond the traditionally-held view of her as FDR's First Lady and begins to accord her the rightful place she deserves as perhaps one of the most prominent political people of the twentieth century.

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Citation: Janice M. Leone. Review of Black, Allida M., ed. *Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. September, 1999.

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