

Championing a Champion: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Marian Anderson “Freedom Concert”

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No First Lady is more closely associated with the issue of civil rights for African Americans than is Eleanor Roosevelt; and no single act is more illustrative of Mrs. Roosevelt's image as a civil rights advocate than her resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution in support of Marian Anderson's right to perform in Constitution Hall in April 1939. This was not the first action the First Lady had taken in support of African Americans. Her persistent support of the Costigan Wagner Anti-lynching bill and her refusal to support a segregated seating pattern at the Southern Conference on Human Welfare's conference in Birmingham, Alabama the previous summer already had attracted national attention. Yet the stance she took in support of the contralto forms the most celebrated example of Eleanor Roosevelt's White House civil rights legacy.

Despite this heartfelt commitment to outlaw racial discrimination, Mrs. Roosevelt did not respond immediately to the Anderson ban. The D.A.R. refused Anderson's application on January 9, 1939 and the First Lady did not resign until February 26th. The course Eleanor Roosevelt took to reach this decision was fraught with personal struggles, limitations, and political constraints. Contrary to previous historians' assessment, her decision to resign from the D.A.R. was not an easy one for her to make. Citing previously unpublished sources as well as publications and organizational records never before applied to this controversy, this essay will focus on why Eleanor Roosevelt decided to resign, how she mobilized support for Marian Anderson's appearance in the nation's capitol, and what post-concert action she took to ensure that the public would remember what issue was at stake long after the concert ended. Finally, the effect the concert had on her political development will be assessed.

When Franklin Roosevelt became the 32nd President in March 1933, black America warily assessed his promise of a “New Deal for the American People.” The barrage of legislation which came from the White House during the First Hundred Days of the FDR Administration provided little evidence of change in federal response to racial injustice. However, between 1933 and 1936, black America shifted away from the party of Lincoln to the party of Roosevelt in record numbers. Although FDR did begin to address the specific problems of black America in 1935, this shift in voter allegiance is directly traceable to earlier non-legislative factors: the public civil rights stances of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and the appointment of Cabinet officials and

program directors sympathetic to the plight of minorities. These New Deal leaders reflected more of the symbolic humanity of the programs than did the legislation itself.¹

Prior to 1933, the White House was a house for white Americans. Although Theodore Roosevelt entertained Booker T. Washington at the White House, this racial summit in no way set any precedents for subsequent presidents to follow. Any support that the Washington-Roosevelt conference generated for racial reform was undercut by Roosevelt's over zealous response, labeled by Senator Ben Tillman as an "executive lynching," to the shooting incident at Brownsville, Texas in 1906. Nor did subsequent chief executives promote attitudes which could promote racial harmony. Woodrow Wilson responded to the twenty pieces of desegregation legislation introduced in the 1912 Congressional session by issuing an executive order segregating federal cafeteria and restrooms and barring blacks from specific areas of federal employment. Two years later, when Wilson met with civil rights leader Monroe Trotter to discuss this policy, he publicly dismissed Trotter's arguments by saying that his language was "insulting." When Lou Hoover invited the wife of Oscar DePriest, a black man recently elected to represent Illinois' First Congressional district, to a 1929 White House tea honoring the Congressional family members, Herbert Hoover refused comment on the resolutions by several Southern assemblies "condemning certain social policies of the administration in entertaining Negroes in the White House on a parity with white ladies."²

Eleanor Roosevelt reversed these practices. As First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt shocked conservative Washington social circles by hosting White House receptions for black groups and black civil rights leaders. She frequently posed for photographs at these functions and thereby lent the prestige of her office to a public campaign against racial discrimination. Not only did she invite prominent black leaders and educators to White House gatherings, she insisted they not be delegated to black-only tables. Furthermore, she asked black entertainers to the White House and often praised their artistry in her weekly press conferences. As the New Deal progressed, her advocacy of civil rights took a more directly political turn. She appeared at national civil rights conventions, wrote extensive articles rebuking "racial intolerance," posed for photographs with black civil rights activists, and urged her husband to send presidential greetings to those attending these functions. As a direct result of Eleanor Roosevelt's prodding, FDR was the first President to send letters of encouragement to national civil rights associations. In contrast to those who occupied the White House before her, Mrs. Roosevelt sent a clear message to the American public. It was her home now and entry would not be restricted along the lines of race.³

While Eleanor Roosevelt strove to promote democracy at home, Marian Anderson pursued her dreams abroad. After triumphing over 300 competitors to win the prestigious Philadelphia Philharmonic competition in 1926, at the age of eighteen, Marian Anderson was awarded the Julius Rosenwald scholarship which she used to follow her mentor, Sarah Cahier, to Vienna. Eva Gauthier, a music critic whose advice Anderson sought in preparation for a New York contest, believed that despite the accolades Anderson received, she "was not happy in her own country: her race seemed to be against her." Cahier's return to Austria compounded this discomfort. Conse-

quently, following the pattern of many classical vocalists, Marian Anderson decided to study, train and perform in Europe.

While abroad, Anderson triumphed, receiving lavish praise from both concert goers and the music critics of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Russia, France and Italy. Swedish, Danish and British royalty presented her their highest nonmilitary decorations and Joseph Stalin entertained her as his guest while she performed in the Soviet Union. By 1935, she conquered the Salzburg Music Festival. Later that year, Mrs. Roosevelt invited Marian Anderson to perform at the White House and a lifelong camaraderie between the two women began.⁴

In 1936, Anderson's manager, Sol Hurok, urged his artist to focus less on her European following and to concentrate on her American tour. Following his advice, the contralto devoted 1938 and 1939 to the United States where she appeared in the finest auditoria before integrated audiences across the country to rave reviews from the Atlanta, New York, Boston, St. Louis, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Memphis press. Equally praised for her talent and her poise, Anderson crossed the color line to become the gifted diva. The artist Toscanini called "a voice heard once in a hundred years" began establishing a devoted biracial following in the United States.⁵

As part of her 1936 tour, Anderson accepted Howard University's request for a benefit performance for their School of Music. For over a decade the University Concert Series had sponsored performances by renowned artists of both races as cultural gesture to the District and as a minor fundraising tool for the University. Marian Anderson's three performances prior to 1939 were the highlights of the series and drew successively larger integrated crowds which forced the University to seek new concert space. By 1938, the 1100 seat auditorium of Armstrong High School could not accommodate all the requests for tickets to Anderson's concert and the University rented the Rialto Theater to meet the increased demand. Although Armstrong High School and the Rialto Theater were black facilities, the audience for all Anderson's concerts was predominantly white. Consequently, in 1939, with the Rialto in receivership and Anderson's popularity steadily increasing, the Concert series had to find another, larger location for its most popular annual event.⁶

In 1939, Washington, D.C., like most major urban areas, was a segregated city. Yet it was an erratic form of segregation in which the District Government haphazardly enforced the local separatist ordinances. Although the Organic Law of 1906 mandated a dual school system for black and white students, the D.C. School Board relaxed those standards in social situations. White universities and biracial community associations regularly used the recreation facilities and auditoriums of black public schools. Black labor organizations often conducted their meetings in assembly halls of white religious and labor organizations. District citizens frequently overlooked Jim Crow customs when they attended the theater, the symphony or a public lecture. Consequently, throughout the twenties and thirties, black and white patrons integrated the audiences of numerous concerts staged at both federal auditoriums and private concert halls.⁷

This elasticized form of segregation went unchallenged until January 9, 1939 when Howard University School of Music applied to the D.A.R. for use of their

auditorium, Constitution Hall, for Anderson's fourth Washington appearance. Unbeknownst to all initially involved in this application, this request, the subsequent struggle to lease appropriate concert space, and the concert itself merged to become the major event in the civil rights legacy of the New Deal, a pivotal battle in the campaign to end Jim Crow social practices in the nation's capital, and a crucial test of Eleanor Roosevelt's political judgment.

Constitution Hall was the preeminent auditorium in Washington. Built in 1929 by the D.A.R. to house its national headquarters and host its national conventions, the Hall's 4000 seating capacity made it the largest auditorium in the District. The National D.A.R. Board "authorized almost immediately" public use of the Hall for "a minimum cost as a tangible contribution to life in the Nation's Capital." As home to both the National Symphony Orchestra, the Washington Opera, and the National Geographic Society, Constitution Hall served as the focal point in the District for classical music and international culture. And it was the only hall in the nation's capital comparable to those in which Marian Anderson appeared in other cities around the nation and throughout the world.⁸

Although Constitution Hall was the only obvious stage for the concert, the D.A.R. was not a logical source of support for Marian Anderson in particular or black Americans in general. The organization's legacy of zealous patriotic activism fostered such reactive support of traditional social custom that William Allen White accused "the nice old girls of the D.A.R." of being so mesmerized by "the tea-gladiators of Washington" that they had "yanked the Klan out of the cow pasture and set it down in the breakfast room of respectability."⁹

Undaunted by this history, on January 9th, Charles Cohen, Chairman of the Howard University Concert Series, and V.D. Johnston, University Treasurer, applied to the D.A.R. for use of its concert facility April 9th. Fred Hand, manager of Constitution Hall, responded to her request by informing Mr. Cohen that the Hall had a standing policy of not renting concert space to black artists. However, late that day, Hand told the press that Marian Anderson could not perform in Constitution Hall because the date requested had been booked a year earlier by the National Symphony Orchestra and the D.A.R. regulations prohibit rental of the Hall for two engagements on the same day.

Although the record of the activities of the following ten days is unclear as to who actually instigated the response, the actions taken to appeal to the D.A.R. for reconsideration are clear. Treasurer V.D. Johnston contacted Charles Houston, who was then Special Counsel to the NAACP as well as a Howard University Board Member. Houston advised Johnston to inform the press about the dilemma and to request letters of support from Anderson's peers. After requesting such endorsements, the University informed the Washington press of the D.A.R.'s restrictive policy. Within a day after the requests were mailed, such leading performers as Geraldine Farrar, Kirsten Flagstad, Lawrence Tibbet, and the conductors Walter Damrosch and Leopold Stokowski telegraphed their disapproval to the D.A.R.. The Washington press, however, was slower to respond. *The Washington Post* ran an editorial expressing dismay at the D.A.R.'s action but stopping short of calling for its reversal. *The Washington Star* ignored the

issue until February 1st. Only *The Washington Afro-American* and *The Washington Times-Herald* challenged the D.A.R.'s decision and called on Congress to build a federal auditorium in the District which would be free of racial discrimination.¹⁰

Action intensified on all fronts during the following week. Assured by Anderson's manager Sol Hurok that Constitution Hall was available April 8th and April 10th, Johnston and Cohen reapplied to Hand. The D.A.R. again refused permission, this time stating no reason. Howard Concert officials appealed the decision. On January 16, in New York City, the Spingarn Committee of the NAACP met and unanimously voted to present its most prestigious award to Anderson for "her special contributions in the field of music . . . and her magnificent dignity as a human being." In Washington, Charles Houston suggested that a community meeting be called to discuss the Anderson ban and to propose alternative strategies and Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP, called on Eleanor Roosevelt to ask her to present the Spingarn Medal to Anderson at the National NAACP conference in July. Mrs. Roosevelt gladly accepted.¹¹

Three days later, Howard University applied to the Community Center Department for permission to use Central High School Auditorium for the April 9th event. The petition was referred to the Committee on the Use of Public Buildings of the District Board of Education for review. As Central High School was a white school, the committee recommended that Superintendent of Schools Frank Ballou decline the request and recommend the use of Armstrong auditorium instead. Press coverage increased and Howard, through President Johnston and Charles Houston, asked prominent Washingtonians to lobby the D.A.R. on its behalf. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, Agriculture Secretary Henry A. Wallace, several members of Congress, and Washington Cathedral Canon Anson Phelps Stokes responded to the University's request.¹²

Thus, by February, public pressure mounted. Nevertheless, despite requests by Anderson's agents to book the hall open any date available the first two weeks in April, Constitution Hall continued to ban Anderson from its stage. On February 13th, the President General of the D.A.R., Mrs. H.M. Robert, Jr., mailed a communique on the matter to her State Regents informing them that "the rules [of the D.A.R.] are in accordance with the policy of theaters, auditoriums, hotels and public schools of the District of Columbia." Two days later, Mr. Hand informed Mr. Cohen "the hall is not available for a concert by Miss Anderson."¹³ There could be no appeal. Anderson would have to find space elsewhere in the District.

Anticipating this rebuff, concert sponsors pursued other options. While Howard University officials debated among themselves which action to take next, local press printed the Board of Education's decision and editorialized against it. On February 17th, Johnston called a citywide meeting to discuss the Board's refusal and to plan the counterattack. By the 18th, local organizations began adopting resolutions protesting both the D.A.R. and the Education Board's actions. Jascha Heifetz, the world famous concert violinist, denounced the D.A.R. from the Constitution Hall stage, saying he was ashamed at being on "a stage barred to a great singer because of her race." That same evening, five blocks away, Charles Edward Russell, a liberal white attorney, chaired an interracial gathering which agreed to circulate petitions urging

the use of Central High School Auditorium. This audience, formally incorporating itself as the Marian Anderson Citizens Committee (MACC), adopted a resolution instructing its interim officers to request permission to present the petitions to the School Board at its March 1st meeting. By February 22nd, the MACC was front page news in the District and the national press roundly criticized the Board's decision.¹⁴

Four days later, as the MACC reconvened to assemble the 3500 signatures it collected on its petition, Eleanor Roosevelt debated which action to take on Anderson's behalf. Howard University had lobbied the First Lady since the beginning of February to issue a public statement rebuking the D.A.R. but Mrs. Roosevelt refused, arguing that such a statement would do no good as the organization "considered [her] to be too radical." Besides, she told two friends, "she would like to make a statement . . . [but] this situation is so bad that plenty of people will come out against it."¹⁵ This refusal, however, did not mean that Mrs. Roosevelt sat idly along the sidelines. Carefully, she mapped her own strategy, planning a forceful rebuttal to the snubbing Anderson received in the nation's capital.

Mrs. Roosevelt was not hiding behind the curtain of public opinion. Her public position of race already well known, immediately after the D.A.R. initially rebuffed Anderson, Eleanor Roosevelt agreed to present the Spingarn Medal to the diva at the National NAACP convention, met with NAACP Secretary Walter White and conference chair Dr. Elizabeth Yates Webb to discuss the broadcast of the Spingarn awards ceremony, and planned to invite Anderson to perform for the British King and Queen at the White House in June.

The strategical problem for Mrs. Roosevelt was how to support Anderson without upstaging the local community or further angering the powerful Southern Democrats. Initially, she decided to refrain from direct action and to participate only peripherally in the campaign. On February 20th, less than a week after Anderson's appeals to the D.A.R. and the Board of Education were rejected, Mrs. Roosevelt mentioned Anderson in her column for the first time. Yet, on February 25, she denied a request from Howard Treasurer Johnston to criticize the D.A.R. in her weekly press conferences. However, the following day, she did respond to the MACC request for telegrams in support of the proposed concert, wiring John Lovell that she "regret[s] extremely that Washington is to be deprived of hearing Marian Anderson, a great artist." Clearly, the First Lady did not sidestep the problem. She publicly committed herself to the black performer while she tried to find the most effective way to implement that commitment.¹⁶

By the end of the week, Eleanor Roosevelt concluded that for maximum impact her actions must be seen as a response to a national, rather than local, issue. Consequently, the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution and not the District of Columbia Board of Education should be the focus of the rebuttal. Having taken steps to insure Anderson's eventual performance in the District and having carefully limited her association with the local groups appealing a local political decision, Mrs. Roosevelt remained free to act as an individual member of an organization responding to a decision made by that body's leadership. This masterful political strategy resounded with long range political and public policy implications. Consequently,

when Eleanor Roosevelt determined to act as an individual outside the locale directly affected by the policy, she expanded its focus from one of local leasing policies to one of national social import.

She knew that she could not continue to support “an organization which is so-sighted,” especially since the society issued her membership after the 1932 election and she “had no hope of being an active member.” And as no other prominent member had challenged the organization’s policy, Mrs. Roosevelt accepted the responsibility she initially declined. As the nation’s most prominent daughter of the American Revolution, Eleanor Roosevelt recognized that no one of her stature had publicly challenged the D.A.R.’s short-sightedness. If she believed that the D.A.R. avoided its responsibility to educate the nation, she could not comply with its negligence. She had no choice but to resign.¹⁷

Once she reached this decision, the First Lady wrote D.A.R. President General Robert that she was “in complete disagreement with the attitude” the D.A.R. promoted when they banned Anderson from its stage. Furthermore, by its actions, she asserted, the organization “set an example which seems to me unfortunate. . . . You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed [to do this].” Because she had “never been a very useful member of the [D.A.R.]” and had no foreseeable opportunity to work from within to change the policy, the First Lady believed that “the only proper procedure to follow” would be to not “continue to be a member of your organization.” Therefore, Mrs. Roosevelt felt “obliged to send in . . . my resignation.”¹⁸

Even more significant than the overt actions Mrs. Roosevelt took behind the scenes to facilitate Anderson’s appearance in the District was the pivotal role she played in highlighting the discriminatory conduct of such a prestigious organization as the D.A.R. The power of understatement displayed in her “My Day” column of February 28, 1939 revealed Eleanor Roosevelt’s hand on the pulse of the nation. Not only did Mrs. Roosevelt begin her column with the standard account of her social duties of the day before, she refrained from naming the issue or the organization which had caused her distress.

This tactic clearly portrayed the situation in impersonal, nonthreatening terms with which the majority of her readers would identify. She introduced the dilemma simply: “I have been debating in my mind for some time a question which I have had to debate with myself once or twice before in my life. Usually I have decided differently from the way in which I am deciding now.” She then outlined the problem and her response to it:

The question is, if you belong to an organization and disapprove of an action which is typical of a policy, shall you resign or is it better to work for a changed point of view within the organization? In the past when I was able to work actively in any organization to which I had belonged, I have usually stayed in until I had at least made a fight and been defeated.

Even then I have as a rule accepted my defeat and decided either that I was wrong or that I was perhaps a little too far ahead of the thinking of the majority of that time. I have often found that the thing in which I was interested was

done some years later. But, in this case I belong to an organization in which I do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked on in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, therefore I am resigning.”¹⁹

The next day, the column splashed across the front pages of American newspapers from San Francisco to New York City. Although others had resigned from the D.A.R. over this issue, although other major public figures had publicly lamented the D.A.R.’s policy, Eleanor Roosevelt placed Marian Anderson, the D.A.R., and racial discrimination on a national stage where it could not be ignored. By placing her political influence and personal popularity squarely behind Anderson and in front of the D.A.R., she moved the conflict into another arena.

On February 28, the day after Mrs. Roosevelt’s column appeared, both sides involved in the Central High School appeal prepared for another round. Acting as MACC Chairman, Charles Houston wrote School Board President Doyle requesting permission to appear before the March 1 meeting to “present new matters to be brought . . . in support of the application for [re]consideration.” At the same time, Superintendent of Schools Frank Ballou issued a thirteen page press release focusing on a narrow, literal interpretation of existing segregation laws to support his ruling.²⁰

Meanwhile MACC members scoured the city for adequate recital facilities while the National NAACP urged the committee to forego its plans rather than have Anderson perform in a second rate arena or acknowledge the validity of a dual school system. Recognizing that the MACC would not cancel the event, Walter White worked frantically to resolve the dispute while the MACC officials and Anderson’s managerial staff, forsaking a coordinated approach, acted independently. Johnston tried to convince Hurok that the rundown Belasco Theater was better than no concert space at all. While Hurok’s aide Gerald Goode requested White and Houston’s aid in “investigating the possibility of Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial,” the same afternoon, Hurok announced to *The New York Times* that the concert would be held at the memorial rather than in the public park opposite Constitution Hall. However, no plans had been made to secure the park. The situation, according to the first Vice President of the District NAACP, was “still [so much] up in the air” that the concert could be arranged “only if a miracle should happen.”²¹

Walter White, Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles Houston did indeed work miracles the following day. After conferring to decide which officials they would solicit, the triumvirate lobbied Hurok’s staff, the White House, and the Interior Department with conviction and expertise. National Youth Administration administrator Mary McLeod Bethune and Assistant Interior Secretary Oscar Chapman supported the memorial site and agreed to declare their support publicly that evening at a citywide MACC rally. Clearly, Mrs. Roosevelt’s White House influence paved the way for such rapid response.²²

Chapman presented the Lincoln memorial request to Interior Secretary Ickes. A past president of the Chicago NAACP, Ickes telephoned Franklin Roosevelt and requested an immediate appointment. Roosevelt, who was preparing to leave town that afternoon, delayed his plans and agreed to see the Interior official. When in-

formed of Ickes' request, the President responded, "I don't care if she sings from the top of the Washington monument as long as she sings." Ickes then called an afternoon press conference and announced that the Lincoln Memorial would be the site of the April 9 concert.²³

Once again the Anderson affair made the front pages of newspapers around the country. The struggle to find appropriate space for a world famous artist outweighed the personal bias of certain members of the press corps toward black civil rights in general and the NAACP in particular. Only the perennial Roosevelt critic Westbrook Pegler disparaged the sudden turn in events.²⁴

Once permission was granted for the Lincoln Memorial, the MACC and the National NAACP had fewer than 10 days to prepare for the concert. Immediately, White, Houston and Goode conferred to divide responsibilities among the interested parties. The NAACP agreed to contact all its chapter presidents to urge them to send buses to the event, organize special radio parties, and to telegraph their support to Secretary Ickes and their displeasure to the Board of Education. Goode agreed to spend the next week in Washington completing the audio arrangements and coordinating the press coverage of Anderson's stay in the capital. Houston called a special meeting of the MACC to discuss the organization's role in the upcoming concert and to decide what actions the group should take regarding the Board of Education.²⁵

Once this division of labor was determined, the NAACP launched a campaign to assemble as diverse a group of prominent co-sponsors for the event as possible. Although Eleanor Roosevelt was the immediate first choice for chairing the event, she declined as she was in the midst of a nationwide lecture tour. Fearing that she might upstage Miss Anderson, Mrs. Roosevelt refrained from additional public actions. She asked her close friend Congresswoman Caroline O'Day to coordinate the endorsements. Telegrams asking assistance "in sponsoring an open-air free concert by Marian Anderson under the auspices of Howard University from the Steps of the Lincoln Memorial . . . at 5 P.M., Sunday, April 9" were sent to over 500 people.²⁶

By that Easter Sunday, over 300 prominent individuals signed on as sponsors of the event. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes and Justice Hugo Black, actress Tallulah Bankhead, author and philanthropist Clare Booth Luce, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Attorney General Frank Murphy, and several members of congress and their families joined eighty-five national organizations in sponsoring the "Freedom Concert." Supporters unable to attend wired letters of support and greetings to be read to the crowd prior to Anderson's performance. Typical of such response was Katherine Hepburn's telegram to Caroline O'Day, "Unable to leave New York Sunday but I will heartily sponsor any such plans. You may use my name freely in regard to this matter."²⁷

By the time Easter Sunday arrived, the concert had become a national cause celebre. The D.A.R. had been rebuked throughout the three month campaign to stage the event, but the racial policy implications had been virtually ignored. If the event was to promote the change that the NAACP, some MACC members, and the First Lady desired, the concert must be viewed in cultural, political and racial terms. Few who realized the long range implications of the event had the stature and wide-ranging

popularity to achieve this success. Eleanor Roosevelt had both. Consequently, she was charged with carrying the mantle into the public fray. By inviting Anderson to sing for the King and Queen of England and agreeing to present Anderson the Spingarn medal in the midst of the controversy, the First Lady clearly indicated to the public that she intended to stay the course.

Just as the press placed Mrs. Roosevelt's resignation on the front page six weeks earlier, the concert itself was the media event of the season. Encouraged by Eleanor Roosevelt, Gerald Goode and Harold Ickes, NBC and other radio networks broadcast her performance across the country. Rave front page reviews accompanied by a collage of photographs dominated the coverage given the event by both the national news magazines and the major urban press. Even print media in smaller urban areas such as Savannah, Knoxville, Norfolk, Wichita, Bridgeport, Richmond and Little Rock gave the event prominent coverage. Once again, the editorials and articles were unanimous in their praise of and support for the diva's appearance.²⁸

Ernest K. Lindley of *The Washington Post* penned perhaps the most astute assessment of the Anderson affair.

Since the concert I have heard a good many comments to the effect that it served to improve race relations. Perhaps it did, although for all I know it may have had the opposite effect and certainly nothing seems to go very far toward solving one of the toughest problems our forebears [sic] have bequeathed to us. I think, though, that the contralto voice of this colored girl from the slums of Philadelphia, singing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, made everyone who heard her feel a little nobler.²⁹

A little nobility went a long way. In the final analysis, the concert was much more significant politically after the fact than it was when it occurred. By carefully reading the public response to the D.A.R.'s actions, Eleanor Roosevelt and the NAACP were able to combine their own personal distaste with their professional expertise for political gain. As the White House prepared for an election year, and blacks left the party of Lincoln and joined the Roosevelt coalition in record numbers, the urban black vote became a major component of the urban bloc supporting FDR. Eleanor Roosevelt achieved a major, albeit symbolic, civil rights victory which benefitted the NAACP without threatening her husband's political coalition.

Marian Anderson was an exceptional talent in an exceptional situation. Her unique success in a field traditionally viewed by average white Americans as one beyond the range of their own abilities underscored the non-stereotypical qualities of Anderson's behavior. Consequently, there would be no great rush to emulate Anderson's talents for a quick commercial venture. She would be no role model for aggressive black performers who wanted a larger share of the American entertainment dollar. Anderson's venture into genius precluded her entrance into the politics of confrontation. Her talent placed her beyond the scope of the color line and out of the range of the segregationists' fire. This does not imply, however, that Anderson had no impact on Eleanor Roosevelt's political education or on the strategy of the civil rights movement.

The NAACP, as the predominant civil rights organization affiliated with the concert, reaped abundant awards from its association with the event. Its membership doubled within twelve months and its financial base expanded substantially as well. In addition, the civil rights association's media coverage skyrocketed because of its affiliation with Anderson's concert and its decision to bestow the prestigious Spingarn Medal to Anderson at its national convention in July 1939. Anderson, who had not associated herself with any branch of the civil rights movement prior to the 1939 struggle, committed herself to the NAACP and became one of its leading fundraisers throughout her career. Walter White's skillful arbitration between the Marian Anderson Citizens Committee, Howard University, the National NAACP Board, and the Department of Interior impressed Eleanor Roosevelt and the working relationship between the two major advocates of civil rights improved.³⁰

Four days after Marian Anderson's triumph, as Eleanor Roosevelt addressed the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the racism Anderson faced in the nation's capital reverberated through her remarks. Arguing that Americans "ought to be more grown up" so that "we do not develop intolerance along any line," the First Lady pleaded with the religious community assembled before her to follow the dictates of their consciences. "We should really try to stand always with the people who are trying to be tolerant and to act justly . . . and to strive to . . . keep from judging other people harshly when they do not always achieve our ideal." With the complexities of the Anderson affair fresh in her mind, Mrs. Roosevelt concluded her remarks with the following reflection:

What we should strive to do is accept the facts, face the truth, and make up our minds that we will try to keep ourselves and all the groups and people we can tough in the spirit of real trust, real democracy, and real charity toward all people.³¹

The toughness of which she spoke included a strong strand of political pragmatism. The night before she delivered the aforementioned speech, she learned that a small group of civil rights activists planned to picket the D.A.R.'s general convention the following week. She immediately wired Walter White to ask if he could intervene to stop the demonstration. Clearly, Eleanor Roosevelt was concerned, but her concern was as much for the demonstrators themselves as for ensuring the public support she and others had worked so hard to develop.

It worries me very much to have anything of this kind done. In the first place, Washington is a city where one could have **serious trouble** [emphasis added] and I think it would not do any good to picket the D.A.R. . . . At present the D.A.R. Society is condemned for the stand it took and if picketing is done it may result in the sympathy swinging to the other side.³²

The demonstration did not occur. White followed these suggestions, wiring her "agree wholeheartedly with opinion in your letter . . . used almost identical language in letter . . . urging that plan be abandoned." However, Eleanor Roosevelt, like those activists planning to picket, did not want to let the D.A.R. off the hook. As she

wrote her dear friend Lorena Hickok, she still was “afraid of an ‘incident’ but I think I’ve thought up an alternative that will put them (the D.A.R.) in a hole.”³³

Although the records did not indicate what Mrs. Roosevelt’s “alternative” was [she informed Hickok of her actions over the telephone], the D.A.R. spent most of its annual meeting reacting to the criticism it received for its stance. The intensity of its response was so strong that when the President General delivered her Annual Report to the society, she felt compelled both to attack her critics and justify her behavior, charging “statements were incorrect and were not based on the facts.” Declaring that the society had been “consistently a friend of . . . many minority groups,” she argued that the D.A.R. had no choice but to assume the stance it took. “Could the Society by continuing a practice contrary to accepted custom, cope with its difficulties?”³⁴

Ten days after President General Robert delivered her report, on April 28th, the NAACP formally re-announced that Eleanor Roosevelt accepted its invitation to present Ms. Anderson the Spingarn medal at its national conference in Richmond, Virginia July 2nd. The inherent symbolism of the First Lady of American Civil Rights agreeing to present a medal to an African-American Woman in the birthplace of the Confederacy on Independence Day Weekend could hardly be overlooked. The demand for seats was so strong that tickets for the event were unavailable a week after the announcement was made. Such potent response enabled White to convince NBC and other radio affiliates to create a temporary nationwide hook-up to broadcast the First Lady’s remarks live. On the day of the ceremony, the crowd overflowed the Richmond Mosque’s 5300 seating capacity and spilled out into the streets to hear her.³⁵

Rather than specifically tailor her remarks to NAACP supporters and African-Americans, Eleanor Roosevelt chose to address issues which all Americans must confront. Foremost among “subjects of primary importance” is “the preservation of democracy, . . . the ability of every individual to be a really valuable citizen.” If the country is to succeed in efforts to be a true democracy, she informed her listeners, “certain things stand out as necessities.”

First and foremost, we must have whatever rights of citizenship are ours under the Constitution. Then we must have education for everybody.

Without these two vital elements, she asserted, government will fail because its citizens will be unable to guide it intelligently. Every American needs to participate in this instruction. “All races and all groups must see today that we as a whole, as a people, are able to understand the problems before us.” Subtly reminding her audience of the struggles of the past six months, she pleaded with her audience to

face well the problem that people cannot grow up good citizens unless we are concerned about the environment of all our people; not just a group here and there but all our people.

A society is only as healthy as its members. However, as the First Lady reminded her listeners, “you cannot have physical health, mental development, spiritual happiness, unless you live in an environment that makes it possible.” It is up to each person to confront the discrimination they encounter in an assertive manner and to be ready

to delay or, if necessary sacrifice, an individual desire so that “improvement in the opportunities for people” society passed over can be obtained.

Eleanor Roosevelt knew such change would not be easy, but that is why the Spingarn medal was necessary. Recognition of “the achievements of people who had more difficulties than the average to overcome” to reach their goal should inspire all Americans, Eleanor Roosevelt included, to strive for the most democracy has to offer. Only then would the social and political victory be complete.

I always think that it must be a tremendously gratifying thing to feel that you have won out over very great difficulties. If everything was in your favor, if you did not have to surmount any great mountains, then you have nothing to be proud of. But if you feel that you have special difficulties, then you must indeed be proud of your achievement.

To underscore once again the relevance of Marian Anderson’s concert, Mrs. Roosevelt reminded those assembled “as you sit here this afternoon perhaps some of you are giving thanks for better understanding . . . for more people who are working with you who perhaps were not even aware that you had certain problems.”

If so, she concluded, it is perhaps because Marian Anderson “developed herself as an individual . . . and had the courage to meet many difficulties [with] great dignity.”

In her acceptance speech, Anderson argued that these words were as applicable to the First Lady as they were to herself. Already having privately expressed her “profound admiration” for Mrs. Roosevelt, Marian Anderson publicly reiterated her esteem for her champion. “I feel it a signal honor to have received the medal from the hands of our First Lady who is not a first lady in name only but in every deed.”³⁶

Eleanor Roosevelt clearly understood the political implications of Anderson’s talent and success and immediately risked herself while she strove to remind the public what the controversy represented. By reluctantly associating herself as a primary power source behind the concert, by allowing herself to be photographed sitting next to black political and social leaders on stage of the NAACP national convention on Independence weekend in a stronghold of Southern conservatism, Mrs. Roosevelt made the event overtly political two months after Anderson’s final encore.

The Marian Anderson venture taught Mrs. Roosevelt a valuable lesson. She clearly saw the impact she had when she used her column for political persuasion. In 1939, Mrs. Roosevelt was just beginning to use “My Day” as her own political forum. The Marian Anderson controversy and the response it generated from her readers showed Eleanor Roosevelt the direct impact she had when she spoke out on a political event. She received more mail supporting her resignation from the D.A.R. than she did on any other issue she associated herself with in 1939. Gallup and other public opinion polls revealed that her backing of Anderson increased her popularity in all areas of the country, except the deep South, and even there, the decrease was minuscule.³⁷

Consequently, this experience reinforced Mrs. Roosevelt’s venture into the politics of confrontation and helped steel her for the 1940 campaign. Although the First Lady was no stranger to criticism by April 1939, the intensity and widespread reaction her endorsement of Anderson generated was a new experience for her. By that fall,

a popular campaign button on Republican lapels read “We Don’t Want Eleanor Either” and attacks she discounted in public as “mudslinging” were so intense, she wrote her aunt, “the campaign is as bad in personal bitterness as any I have ever been in.”³⁸

The political and organizational lessons this event taught her about coalition building and the power of her column would not be overlooked. Although “My Day” continued to be primarily an insight into the First Lady’s personal schedule, by mid-July 1939, Eleanor Roosevelt recognized the political power she could muster in her own right for an issue if she chose to highlight it. In April 1940, United Features Syndicate acknowledged Mrs. Roosevelt’s appeal by awarding her a five year renewal for “My Day” at a time when President Roosevelt’s re-election plans were not known.

But perhaps no action so clearly evokes Eleanor Roosevelt’s experience in l’affaire Anderson than the finesse with which she arbitrated the deadlock between Franklin Roosevelt and A. Philip Randolph over the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1941. Recalling the ease with which she was able to mobilize Walter White’s and other civil rights leaders’ opposition to the post-concert anti-D.A.R. demonstration underscored her recognition of the severe determination with which the March on Washington Committee approached the issue of fair employment in defense industries. Mrs. Roosevelt recognized that this concern could not be settled by arbitration and acted to promote results acceptable to both parties involved. So strong a role did the First Lady play in facilitating Executive Order 8801 that Walter White credited her with playing “so major a part” in resolving the dispute. But ever the political realistic, she knew that persistent, active monitoring of FEPC practices was just a beginning. “I hope,” she telegraphed A. Philip Randolph after he informed her that he cancelled the demonstration, “from this first step, we may go on to others.”³⁹

In short, Eleanor Roosevelt’s defense of Marian Anderson not only mobilized support for Anderson’s eventual appearance in the nation’s capital, but underscored her own political influence within both the civil rights community and the political establishment. Ironically, by taking the risk to champion Marian Anderson, in the long run, Eleanor Roosevelt championed herself.

** I began studying the concert as a project for Edward Berkowitz’s graduate seminar in History and Public Policy at The George Washington University. Although I was determined to delve even more deeply into Mrs. Roosevelt’s role in the affair, this would not have been possible without the financial support of the Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt Institute and the unfailing support of Frances Seeber, Assistant Director of the FDR library. In addition, the enthusiastic research assistance I received from the following colleagues cannot be overlooked: Charlene Bickford, Kenneth Bowling and Helen Veit of the First Federal Congress Project who relived the event with me; Nina Gilden Seavey and Ormond Seavey of George Washington University whose consistent inquiries made me keep my admiration for Mrs. Roosevelt in perspective; and Wendy Wolff of the Senate History Office, whose editorial suggestions and pungent inquiries helped me track down evasive leads. Finally, Kenneth E. Mannings, Esq. deserves credit for the title. This essay is for him.*

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