

Eleanor Roosevelt and the Declaration of Human Rights



Eleanor Roosevelt was an American who played a large role in the early days of the United Nations. President Harry Truman, who succeeded Mrs. Roosevelt's husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as president, nominated her to be a delegate from the United States to the first organizing meeting of the General Assembly in London, in January 1946. The charter had been ratified in October 1945, and it was time to put it to work to make the world a better place.

Before serving as a delegate, Roosevelt had little experience with international meetings.

But she had a very strong interest and belief in the

United Nations, and after the miseries suffered during World War

II, she knew the world needed a strong international organization.

On the trip to London, she tried to read all the papers from the U.S. State Department to understand the position of the United States on various subjects. The other delegates from the United States were mostly congressmen and

senators, and she was the only woman on the U.S. delegation.

Roosevelt was asked to serve on Committee Three, which dealt with humanitarian, educational, and cultural issues. One of the first items her committee dealt with was the subject of war refugees who did not want to return to their countries.

Western countries, including the United States, took the position that all refugees must be guaranteed the right to choose whether they would return to their homes. Communist countries, under the leadership of the Soviet Union, argued that refugees should be forced to return home and perhaps be punished if they were found to be traitors. Roosevelt was asked to speak for the United States, and the majority of countries supported the Western position.

Also, while in London, the General Assembly established the Economic and Social Council, which created a Human Rights Commission. In addition to being a delegate to the United Nations, Roosevelt became the U.S. representative on this commission. She considered this her most important assignment. She was elected chair, and the group took on the task of writing an International Bill of Rights. The first part of the declaration would

Eleanor Roosevelt holds a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which she helped write.

DECLARATION
Rights

name and define all human rights — not just traditional civil and political rights, but social and cultural rights as well. It was intended to be a morally binding statement.

It was very difficult for the delegates of different nations to reach an agreement. Many translation and linguistic difficulties arose, as well as debate over ideas such as emigration and whether poor countries could offer free education. Finally, after two years of discus-

sion, the commission approved the declaration in June 1948, setting a common goal for all nations and all people to achieve.

The declaration was submitted to the Economic and Social Council and then to the General Assembly. The General Assembly, meeting in Paris, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights four minutes before midnight on December 10, 1948. The vote was 48–0. The communist countries, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa abstained.

The Russian representative attempted at every opportunity to impose communist ideas. Saudi Arabia did not want to grant women equal rights, and South Africa had just initiated **apartheid**.

UN volunteers ensure that Angola's first national election is free and fair.

Apartheid (ah-PART-hite) was once the official policy of the Republic of South Africa. It legalized segregation and promoted discrimination against nonwhites.



Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world,
- Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,
- Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,
- Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,
- Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of

men and women, and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

- Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,
- Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of member states themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

The declaration promotes respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and provides an understanding of what those freedoms are. People must be made aware of the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled. The declaration, which has been translated into almost every existing language, does that.

These rights are everyone's rights. If

people know what they are, they can help promote and defend them. Most wars occur because people take advantage of others and take away their rights. Human rights are worth protecting and are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace.

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