

Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: Human Rights and the Creation of the United Nations

Franklin D. Roosevelt's role in the creation of the United Nations is generally studied separately from his efforts to relieve human suffering in the United States during the Great Depression. A study of FDR's New Deal philosophy reveals, however, that FDR was deeply committed to the protection of human dignity as early as his 1932 presidential campaign. During the campaign he made it clear "that money, rather than humanity, was expendable" (1).

Roosevelt's calls for legislation to protect human dignity and "the security of the men, women, and children of the Nation against certain hazards and vicissitudes of life" were transformed into a call for international protection of such rights. FDR made this connection in his January 1941 "Four Freedoms" speech in which he called upon Congress to support his plan for international protection of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear (2).

This lesson will help students evaluate the relationship between Roosevelt's efforts to provide security and dignity for Americans and his insistence on international protection of human rights through the United Nations. To see how the concept of human rights was incorporated into the New Deal and the United Nations, students will examine speeches and essays written by FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt as well as political documents such as the Atlantic Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

National Standards

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 2A: Demonstrate understanding of the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Standard 3A: Demonstrate understanding of the international background of World War II.

Standard 3B: Demonstrate understanding of World War II and how the Allies prevailed.

Time Frame

Three forty-minute class periods. [The teaching strategy may be extended with the lesson on Eleanor Roosevelt and the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which can be found at The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project: <<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/lesson-plans/er-and-udhr.cfm>>].



Eleanor Roosevelt, with her fellow delegates, at United Nations conference in Paris, France, 1948. (Image courtesy of Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, 5647020.)

Objectives

1. To define human rights.
2. To evaluate how the depression gave FDR an opportunity to reform government and improve "the plight of the common people."
3. To analyze the definition of human rights in Eleanor Roosevelt's World War II essay, "What We Are Fighting For."

4. To compare and contrast the “Four Freedoms” with the Atlantic Charter and the UN Declaration of Human Rights.
5. To analyze the preamble and Article I of the United Nations Charter.

Background

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the presidential oath of office on March 4, 1933, the nation was in the depths of despair. More than five thousand banks had closed their doors in the previous thirty-six months. By inauguration day, thirty-two states had shut down banks while in the remaining states withdrawals were severely curtailed. The New York Stock Exchange suspended trading and new investment and employment had ground to a virtual halt. Elected on a platform of change, Roosevelt promised more than simple economic recovery, more than Hoover’s “a chicken in every pot.” Roosevelt promised a New Deal that was designed to guarantee every American’s right to human dignity and economic security. In many ways, the Great Depression provided Roosevelt with an opportunity to implement reform legislation and policies that would make the federal government responsible for fulfilling such guarantees.

This concern for human dignity was reflected in many of Roosevelt’s New Deal speeches including his controversial 1932 campaign speech (“Commonwealth Club Address”); his 1934 address to Congress (“Relief, Recovery, and Reform”); and his 1935 Social Security speech (“A Program for Social Security”). He continued this theme during World War II, as illustrated by the Four Freedoms and Atlantic Charter. Roosevelt’s insistence on human dignity, an economic bill of rights, and the need for security around the globe was further reflected in his plan for a United Nations to keep the peace among nations and to guarantee basic human rights for all humankind, not just for Americans (3).

This lesson will enable students to analyze the evolution of Roosevelt’s focus on human rights between the New Deal and the United Nations. In the end, students should be able to answer the following question: Did the United Nations internationalize the New Deal?

Procedures

I. Question 1: To what extent did the Great Depression provide FDR with an opportunity to reform government and society to better “the plight of the common people?”

A. Begin this lesson by showing students a short DVD, *Sights & Sounds of the Farm Security Administration 1935-1943* (For availability please see the list of documents at the end of the teaching strategy). The video provides a brief visual and audio background to the New Deal. It reviews what the students have already learned in class or through assigned readings. The video’s narrator states that what began as a photographic record to document the work of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) became a testament to the overarching goal of FDR’s New Deal, “the betterment of the plight of the common people.” After the video ends, ask students to use their prior knowledge of the New Deal and evaluate what it meant to help the “common people” during the depression. The following discussion points should guide student discussion:

1. How did FDR intend to better the plight of the common man and woman?

2. Using the DVD as a starting point, identify the features of everyday life that FDR considered essential to human dignity. 3. How did the New Deal address these essential features?

4. What is the relationship between economic security and human dignity?

5. What is the relationship between human dignity and human rights?

6. As indicated by the DVD, can you identify basic human rights that were compromised or threatened by the Great Depression?

B. Distribute copies of FDR’s “Message to Congress on Social Security,” and excerpted copies of FDR’s “Radio Address of October 31, 1936.” (For availability please see the list of documents at the end of the teaching strategy). Divide the students into small groups and ask them to read the documents and answer the following questions:

1. “Message to Congress on Social Security”

a. FDR repeatedly refers to “economic security.” What does that mean to you? What did it mean to FDR?

b. Can you protect human rights without “economic security?” Identify the goals of the Social Security Act. Were all of the goals financial?

c. How is the Social Security Act an example of the use of economic reform to protect human rights?

d. How are the goals of the Social Security Act similar to goals of the Farm Security Administration? Evaluate the goals of these two programs in the context of FDR’s goal to better “the plight of the common people.”

2. “Radio Address of October 31, 1936”

a. Compare and contrast this speech with the 1935 Social Security speech. How did FDR define the crisis in 1936? In particular, compare FDR’s statement, “For the greater issue goes beyond units of humanity—it goes to humanity itself,” with the repeated references to “economic security” in the 1935 speech.

b. Discuss what FDR meant when he said, “the greater issue goes beyond units of humanity—it goes to humanity itself.”

C. After students have discussed the documents in small groups, ask them to share their responses with the entire class.

D. Finally, have the students write a short paragraph about the FSA video and the two speeches. They should answer this question: To what extent did the New Deal reform efforts guarantee basic human rights to all Americans?

II. Question 2: To what extent are the Four Freedoms reflected in the Atlantic Charter and in the Joint Declaration of the United Nations on Cooperation for Victory? (For availability please see the list of documents at the end of the teaching strategy).

A. Have students view Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms paintings. (For availability please see the list of documents at the end of the teaching strategy). Using the first activity's documents and discussion notes, ask students to evaluate the paintings in the context of the New Deal.

1. Questions to consider:
 - a. Describe the people in the paintings. What do they have in common? What economic group do they represent?
 - b. What do you think these people did for a living? Why did Rockwell choose these people to portray the abstract ideals of the Four Freedoms?
 - c. Compare the ideals expressed in the paintings with the reform goals of the New Deal. To what extent do these paintings memorialize the goals expressed in the earlier speeches that were examined yesterday?

B. Divide the students into three groups. Distribute one set of documents to each group. (For availability please see documents list at the end of the teaching strategy).

1. Group one: Atlantic Charter and cartoon, "Stretched Around the World."
2. Group two: "Four Freedoms Speech" (excerpts).
3. Group three: Joint Declaration of the United Nations on Cooperation for Victory.

C. Working in small groups, have the students read and analyze the documents, focusing on the intentions of the documents and how they relate to the goals of the New Deal (as the class discussed during the previous day's lesson).

D. After analyzing their respective documents, have the group pick a representative to report their findings to the rest of the class. The group representative should describe their document (who, what, when, where, why) and their group's analysis. After the reports are made, the instructor should ask students to note the important similarities and differences. These should be written on the board and students should copy them down in their notes.

III. Question 3: To what extent was the United States participation in World War II a fight to protect human rights?

A. Have the students read Eleanor Roosevelt's essay: "What We Are Fighting For." (For availability please see documents list at the end of the teaching strategy).

- B. Ask the students to share their reactions.
1. How persuasive is Eleanor Roosevelt?
 2. Do you agree with her description of what Americans were fighting for?
 3. How does her description of the two major goals, "First, for freedom," and "Second, for a permanent basis for peace in the world,"

compare to President Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech?

4. How does it compare to the language of the Atlantic Charter and the Declaration of the United Nations?

5. Eleanor Roosevelt compared the fight to that of World War I. Do you agree with her analysis? Use historical examples to support your answer.

IV. Question 4: To what extent was the charter of the United Nations the embodiment of the ideals expressed in the New Deal and during World War II?

A. Distribute copies of the Preamble and Chapter I, Purposes and Principles, Article I, of the Charter of the United Nations, June 26, 1945, and copy of the UDHR. (For availability please see documents list at the end of the teaching strategy).

B. After reading the documents, ask the students to write a paragraph that answers the following question: Do the documents represent the culmination of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's human rights efforts during the New Deal and World War II?

V. Homework assignment

A. Have the students write a point-of-view essay that agrees or disagrees with the idea that the United Nations represents the internationalization of the New Deal.

B. Students should make specific references to the documents studied in class.

Endnotes

1. Thomas A. Bailey, David M. Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen, eds. *The American Pageant*, 11th ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 796.
2. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Message to Congress on Social Security, January 17, 1935," <<http://www.feri.org/common/news/details.cfm?QID=2069&clientid=11005>>; Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms," <<http://www.feri.org/common/news/details.cfm?QID=2089&clientid=11005>>; Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), 31.
3. These three speeches are available at the American Presidency Project, <<http://www.presidency.ucs.edu/>>.

Bibliography

- Badger, Anthony J. *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.
- Black, Allida, et al. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers: Volume I: The Human Rights Years, 1945-1948*. Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2007.
- Glendon, Mary Ann. *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Johnson, Glen M. "The Contributions of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt to the Development of International Protection for Human Rights." *Human Rights Quarterly* 9 (February 1987): 19-48.
- Kennedy, David M. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Schlesinger, Stephen C. *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2003.

Documents List

"Sights & Sounds of the Farm Security Administration 1935-1943" DVD (13 minutes), Pare Lorentz Film Center, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. To receive a free copy of the DVD, email Jeffrey Urbin, Education Director, Franklin D Roosevelt Library, <Jeffrey.Urbin@nara.gov>.

"A Message to the Congress on Social Security," January 17, 1935, <<http://www.feri.org/common/news/details.cfm?QID=2069&clientid=11005>>.

"We Have Only Just Begun to Fight," Franklin Roosevelt, Radio Address, October 31, 1936, <<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=69&page=transcript>>.

Franklin Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress, January 6, 1941 ("Four Freedoms Speech"), <<http://www.feri.org/common/news/details.cfm?QID=2089&clientid=11005>>.

Norman Rockwell, Four Freedoms paintings, <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedoms/four_freedoms.html>.

Atlantic Charter, August 14, 1941, <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/atlantic.htm>>.

Joint Declaration of the United Nations on Cooperation for Victory, January 1, 1942, <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/decade/decade03.htm>>.

Charter of the United Nations, June 26, 1945 (excerpts: Preamble and Chapter I, Purposes and Principles, Article 1), <<http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>>.

Eleanor Roosevelt, "What We Are Fighting For?", <<http://newdeal.feri.org/er/er30.htm>>.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 9, 1948, <<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teachinger/documents/udhr.cfm>>.

Ivy P. Urdang teaches World Civilizations, A.P. U.S. History, and International Law and Human Rights at Indian Hills High School in Oakland, New Jersey.

In the Next Issue of the *OAH Magazine of History*

The Black Power Movement



Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NYWT&S Collection.

GUEST EDITOR

Peniel E. Joseph

CONTRIBUTORS

"Some Abstract Thing Called Freedom": Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party

Yohuru Williams

Black Women and Black Power

Rhonda Y. Williams

Civil Rights, Black Power and American Democracy

Peniel E. Joseph

Envisioning "The Black Woman" and Analyzing Voices of Protest

Rhonda Y. Williams

Was Thomas Jefferson a Black Panther?

Yohuru Williams

"From Madison to Malcolm X": Comparing and Contrasting the Ideas and Rhetoric of Black Power with those of the American Founding

Veronica Burchard