Gendering Franklin And Eleanor: a Review

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No Ordinary Time, by Doris Kearns Goodwin, is a biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, which looks at this incredible husband and wife team from their early lives, through a disease and an affair which almost ruined their lives, to eventually how they managed to rebuild their relationship on the most unusual terms. How the Roosevelt's redefined their relationship was paralleled by the effects of the war on the American home front and how the country tried to redefine itself in the war's aftermath. This review shows the role gender played in Goodwin's analysis of the lives of Franklin and Eleanor and compared her findings with those of other historians looking at gender roles.

As Doris Kearns Goodwin frequently points out in her book, Eleanor Roosevelt was not the traditional wife of her times. In fact, she let her husband's secretary, Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, handle that position freeing her to pursue her own goals. While Missy played the part of FDR's hostess at parties and kept the president company, Eleanor traveled and visited the American people. Eleanor felt rather out of place as hostess to her husband's cocktail hour, or filling the social duties of a woman of her class. She preferred to keep busy doing work that was meaningful to her rather than play a merely social role. However, Eleanor did believe in her right to be the mistress of the White House and did not like it if others imposed upon her position.[1]

Since Franklin's fight with polio left him paralyzed, Eleanor became instrumental in her husband's political life. Due to his paralysis, Franklin could not move freely around the country as he would like, so he sent the first lady in his place to act as his eyes and ears. Even before his election to the office of the

[1]Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time* (New York, 1994), 82, 300. All parenthetical page references are to Ibid.

president, Eleanor was important. A year after FDR contracted polio, his wife maintained a busy schedule of appointments and political meetings in her husband's name so that he would not be forgotten. He taught her to inspect state institutions while he was governor, looking for human elements, so that he could better understand the people. Someone else probably could have filled this position, but Franklin chose Eleanor.

During FDR's presidency, she continued in her role as inspector and advisor. Her opinions carried a lot of weight with her husband and she used this position to urge Franklin to fight for civil rights, fair labor practices, and the mobilization of women in the military. Frequently, she pushed her husband to the breaking point and fights ensued. Through it all, Franklin let Eleanor speak her mind and tried not to control her. Franklin even allowed Eleanor to influence policy. Trude Pratt Lash gave the first lady credit for the ideas behind her husband's four freedoms, which included the civil rights for which Eleanor had long fought. Perhaps, her greatest contribution to her husband's presidency was her appearance at the party convention for FDR's third nomination. Eleanor did not want to make a speech, since a first lady had never spoken at a convention before. Yet he speech helped to ensure the nomination.

Although she broke some traditional roles, Eleanor for the most part stayed in her sphere. America became Eleanor's house and it's people her children, both of which she had to watch over like a good wife and mother. Her inspections primarily dealt with the sick, the poor, the working class, and children. She was dedicated to abolishing child labor, improving labor laws for women, and establishing minimum wages.

When the war came, Eleanor's main concern was still domestic affairs. A trip to the Pacific illustrated her role and image in the mind of the American people. One soldier who met Eleanor saw her not as a diplomat for the White House but as "an American mother" (464). Eleanor's own words reveal how she tried to conform to traditional ideas of womanhood: "the function of a woman is to ease things along: smooth them over."

Another interesting aspect of Eleanor's life was her relationship with her female friends. As a worker for the League of Women Voters, Eleanor came into contact with other politically oriented women, with some of whom she developed

close relationships. Several of the women Mrs. Roosevelt befriended, according to Goodwin, were lesbians. Goodwin suggests that she was jealous of these women's close, caring relationships. One woman in particular, Lorena Hickok (Hick), developed a special relationship with the First Lady and even fell in love with her. The two women wrote many letters about their love and their longing to see one another when apart. The relationship later faded as the first lady became increasingly active in politics.

Goodwin addresses Eleanor's romance in terms of her Victorian background and refers to Carroll Smith Rosenberg's study. Rosenberg in "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," studied correspondence of women of that era in an attempt to examine female relations in the proper cultural and social context. Many of the letters Rosenberg presented show similar declarations of love and the need to be together. According to Rosenberg, this type of desire was not indicative of homosexuality as much as emotional ties between women. Rosenberg writes, "these female friendships served a number of emotional functions. Within this secure and empathetic world women could share sorrows, anxieties, and joys, confident that other women had experienced similar emotions."[2] Despite the fact that Hick fell in love with Eleanor, Goodwin appears to agree with Rosenberg that, for Eleanor, this relationship filled an emotional need that coming from a Victorian upbringing, only another woman could have fulfilled.

Even though Eleanor's success was contingent on her husband, she was accomplished in her own right. A Gallup poll taken in 1940 revealed a 67% approval rating (higher than her husband's), with most of the American people accepting her work as a part of the national life. This rating eventually dropped as the First Lady continued to fight for the rights of blacks and labor. *The Nation* honored her at a banquet for her work in civil rights and for the poor, one speaker referred to her as an institution. She was among the highest paid lecturers in the country and in 1940, before her husband was nominated for a

[2]Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1 (1975): 63.

third term, she received a five year extension on her newspaper column. Goodwin suggests that such success coming from a woman of Mrs. Roosevelt's position and era was rare. While she does show that other women, such as Eleanor's friend Hick, had a career and were respected, no other women held quite a position of authority and popularity as Eleanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor Roosevelt became the archetype for American women during the war era. Like many women circumstances pushed her out of the house and into the public sphere. Many women took jobs in factories. At the beginning of the war, the government and other institutions discouraged women who entered the work force, such as the Catholic Church, for they were viewed a threat to the American home and traditional family values. When the war took it's toll on the male labor force, however, women were called in as substitutes. At the end of the war women would be expected to return home.

However, as the author points out, there was resistance for a change of status at the end of the war. Goodwin found that many women welcomed their new jobs and responsibilities, with 79% of women saying that they enjoyed working more than staying at home. Eleanor was the model of the change in women's roles at this time. Like many women she was happy out in the work force and did not care to leave. As Goodwin points out "The agitation the sixty-year-old Eleanor felt in not knowing what to do was echoed in the hearts of millions of American women for whom the war had been a major turning point, creating new expectations, new adjustments, new problems" (555).

Eleanor even worked at the cost of her marriage. In 1942 FDR implored his wife to stay at home more, act as his hostess, and accompany him on trips. "But over the past decade, " as Goodwin observes, "the experience of becoming a political force in her own right had brought with it a profoundly different sense of self–of independence, competence, and confidence. If joining her husband now meant giving up the life she had built for herself, it seemed a great deal to ask" (372).

There were women who felt differently. For example Eleanor's daughter Anne loved her new job and responsibilities for awhile, but after a time she encouraged her husband to come home for she could no longer handle the problems without him. This seems more in line with Drew Gilpin Faust's findings in

Mothers of Invention. In this book Faust looks at wealthy southern women in the Civil War and how they dealt with the changes that the war had on gender roles. These women grew up in a world of protection and privilege unable to deal with the new roles and responsibilities the war brought. At times, the women broke gender roles by verbally assaulting enemy soldiers, by playing the spy, or by wearing men's clothes, yet they always retreated behind their gender.[3] Faust claims that the women question "the desirability of female independence or emancipation."[4] But she points out, much like Goodwin, that circumstances had changed and not everything could go back to the way it was.

As stated above, Goodwin also addressed the hesitancy of allowing women into traditional male roles such as the work force. A woman's main function was to see to their homes and the raising of their children. Goodwin wrote of people's concerns about the breakdown of family values if women entered the work force. These same issues are addressed in Christine Stansell's article "Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860." Due to the number of women working, children ran loose on the streets. Some youths turned towards picking up bottles and garbage for money, others to selling themselves on the streets. Stansell finds that New York's middle class was very upset at the presence of such children on the streets and tried to reaffirm their domestic ideals upon the working class. They encouraged women to create a good home environment, which included keeping a clean home and watching over their children.[5] Goodwin found that even in the 1940's the same ideals hold true. As the war came ended women's journals and movies encouraged females to leave their jobs and return to their place as caretakers of the hearth.

While Eleanor's break from traditional female roles is implied throughout the book, Franklin's masculinity is hardly mentioned. This appears to be a silent statement that while

[3]Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 196-248.

[4]Ibid., 256.

[5]Christine Stansell, "Women, Children, and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-1860," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York, 1990), 92-108.

Eleanor did something unusual by going outside her traditional sphere and entering into politics, Franklin's life in politics was perfectly natural. Franklin Roosevelt was presented by Goodwin as a strong leader, who was forced to deal with the problems of the United States and the world. He had to constantly balance public opinion with his policy. Goodwin often referred to the president's inability to have deep personal relationships.

FDR, along with his friend Winston Churchill, took a certain amount of pleasure in mobilizing and waging war. Upon seeing Churchill's map room, Roosevelt ordered one made for himself. He took pride in seeing the growth of the military and reviewing the troops. Upon visiting the men in Africa, Goodwin reports "the sight of so many young Americans in good health and high spirits was a tonic for the soul" (405). Eleanor described the President and the Prime Minister making war plans like two boys playing soldier. Such idealized male views of war are also found in *The Great Adventure* by Michael C.C. Adams. In his piece Adams writes how men traditionally found joy and cleansing in war, not to mention the fact that war was viewed as an honorable way to die. Furthermore, men in the trenches, much like Roosevelt and Churchill in the map room, found male companionship during war.[6] According to Goodwin, Roosevelt also held this romanticized view of war.

Because the President faced the troubles of the nation and the war all day long, it was important for him to come home and relax. Eleanor could not be the type of companion Franklin found in Missy. Missy looked up at Franklin with adoring eyes, she repeatedly listened to his stories, hosted his parties, and made his life more comfortable: a traditional wifely role. In fact, Missy was referred to as FDR's other wife. Home was to be the place where Franklin could escape the outside world, and throughout his life he found women to make this place for him.

Although Franklin Roosevelt contracted polio at a young age, he remained active in sports. He tried hard at an early age to excel in school and advance his position in society. While his father taught him "how to row and sail, and skate and sled" his mother focused more on his moral teaching, taking him with her while she visited the sick and the poor (75-80). In "The habit of

[6]Michael C.C. Adams, *The Great Adventure* (Bloomington, 1990).

victory: the American military and the cult of manliness," Donald J. Mrozek examines three different masculine models. Mrozek points out how fathers tend to emphasize the Masculine Achiever, an idea based on a strong, active, aggressive male stereotype, while mothers tend to emphasize the Christian Gentleman an idea based on right actions, compassion and restraint. Roosevelt's parents appeared to fit this pattern.

Franklin himself seems to fit into the third category, the Masculine Primitive model, in which a man strives to achieve the strength of body and personality of the Masculine Achiever but relies on his primitive instincts for survival. Although Donald Mrozek studies middle-class boys, Franklin seems to fit in since he was competitive in college and at sports. Mrozek states that "competition and physical challenge were important tests of manhood."[7] Goodwin often shows Franklin's fight with polio as an important challenge which changed his life, for he was able to conquer it and continue.

Even though FDR contracted polio long before he ran for president, most people did not know that the leader of the world's most powerful country was crippled. He was proof that being crippled did not make one less of a man. This compare to the findings in Sonya Michel's "Danger On The Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Films." In three of the movies examined by Michel, disabilities suffered from the war, especially amputations were viewed as emasculating, for a man was expected to be the provider and protector. If he were crippled he would be unable to fulfill this role. Furthermore, the man then became dependent on his wife or girlfriend.

FDR was an example of how a man with a major disability could overcome and go on to succeed in the world of politics, a traditional male sphere. Michel also finds in her study that in two of the post-World War II films the women of the injured veterans "were not only to surrender their jobs, but also to subordinate their owns dreams, ambitions, and desires to those of the

[7]Donald J. Mrozek, "The habit of victory: the American military and the cult of manliness," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*, ed. J.A. Mangen and James Wolven (Manchester, 1987): 220-35.

veterans."[8] This did not apply to the relationship between Franklin and Eleanor. Eleanor's power was increased after her husband's paralysis, and furthermore Franklin encouraged it by teaching her how to become an inspector and sending her out in his name. Eleanor doesn't subordinate herself to her husband just because he was in a wheelchair.

Goodwin understands gender better from a woman's point of view. She covers Eleanor's personal growth and break from traditional gender roles in great detail. She compares Eleanor's experience to that of American women as a whole during the war. She clearly showed that women enjoyed their new found freedoms and many refused to give them up at the end of the war, much like the first lady herself. On the other hand, Goodwin is rather vague when it comes to men and their gender roles. Her silence on such issues is a strong statement. Men were made for war, it was their job to play politics and fight on the front lines. However, she misses two important aspects. How did men feel about the roles they were assigned? Moreover, how does the ordinary man feel about the world of gender turned upside down? *No Ordinary Time* is an appropriate title for this book, and Goodwin writes more than just an ordinary biography. She does an excellent job of paralleling the lives of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to this remarkable time in American history. Just as the relationship between this husband and wife would undergo major changes during a time of crisis, so would the American home front. Neither would ever be the same.

[8]Sonya Michel, "Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Films," in *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, 1993), 261.