

NEW

OUTLOOK

DECEMBER, 1932: p. 25

Chief Woman-Elect

By Ernestine Evans



Eleanor Roosevelt

The United States has, as the result of the recent election, a new First Lady-to-be. Ernestine Evans, magazine writer and newspaper woman, pictures Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt in relation to the duties and opportunities of the Mistress of the White House.

THE APACHE INDIANS, so Gennie Goodwin had it from an old Apache scout, chose their chief this way: they always picked out the best hunter, but by the best hunter they did not mean the man who was the best shot, and they were equally uninterested in the performance of this duty in the fellow who could bring home something when the hunting was bad. They chose instead, the Indian who knew where the hunting was best for all the hunters of the tribe.

And the Apaches also chose a woman chief . . . "not exactly a woman chief," said the old scout, "but a chief woman. She had to be a woman whom other women trusted. And her business was to see that the women let the men know a good two weeks ahead of time when the food was getting scarce."

The Apaches, of course, were only Indians and Apache Indians at that, but their formula was not bad, I think. How to get a chief into the White House on any such simple record of past performance of one fundamental service, and how to get a woman in the foreground who will have the chief's ear may, or may not, according to our political lights, have been solved by the great white tribe that now has the run of the country. I venture no opinion as to whether Franklin Roosevelt will find good hunting. Maybe it takes more than a good chief well chosen to smoke venison for all in these industrial capitalist days.

The chief woman of the Apaches was designated

OldMagazineArticles.com

Woman-Elect

not as the chief's wife, but as Chief Woman. Chief Woman is a good office. This country needs one, or more than one. One not interested, at least not as a first interest, in a second term for the chief. It needs as chief woman something more than a woman who will merely keep the chief amused and his domestic board orderly and festive. We need a chief woman



who can make it plain "at the center," as the Russians would say, when the men have got to hustle to stave off disaster and discomfort for the hungry ones of the tribe in Detroit, or in Kansas, or even on the mean streets of the District of Columbia.

Half a dozen women who have known Eleanor Roosevelt Roosevelt in the past twenty years all agree that this is the first President's wife in not a few presidential terms who might have achieved election to something in her own right; who might give ear to the women of the country. And although just listening to other people's troubles isn't enough, it is conceivably something.

The general public know a few salient facts about the next mistress of the White House. She was, for instance, the favorite niece of Theodore Roosevelt, and not, apparently, the favorite cousin of Alice Roosevelt Longworth. The two girls were not much alike.

Eleanor at twelve was left an orphan and went to live, first with her grandmother, and then abroad to school in England, where she was under the tutelage of an intellectual Frenchwoman, Mlle. Souvestre. She began as a little girl to read the London newspapers, and in those days there is no question that some of the best political writing in the world was to be had in London. No reader of British newspapers of that period could fail to be aware of the political atmosphere, no matter how many love, murder, and sport and discovery stories also got into the press. But more, the Frenchwoman was passionately pro-Boer as were many English citizens, who saw in the tactics of Imperial policy in South Africa the beginning of an end of "Empire." It is not to be doubted that the American child began to have opinions about war and peace, if only the reflected opinions of her teacher, if only in the awareness that even patriots could be of two opinions about wars.

The new President's wife has, in the years since, declared herself as a pacifist. But what one declares oneself as, during peacetime, has, as the records show, not so very much effect on one's war-time behavior. There is, in any case, nothing particularly profound about a speech of hers reported, in the "New York Herald Tribune," where she said "Wars come unawares. . . . And once in there is nothing to do but fight. Anything to prevent war must be done in peace." Do wars come unawares? Ask the history teachers.

It is possible to look back at Mrs. Roosevelt's record and learn something of her experience, her public utterances, and to describe her as energetic, calm in the midst of much excitement, capable of rearing a family of five, a comely family, now frequently familiarly

Woman-Elect

clustered on the news reels and in rotogravure. We know she manages without friction ten servants, and keeps order in three households, at Hyde Park, in Albany, and in New York. She has made speeches advocating trade unions for servants, though what demands of the servants she would back, if the slaveys should rise, nobody knows. I suspect she herself could live without servants, or with one. She is simple in her demands and adaptable in her life. She is a marvel of self discipline.

During her husband's term as governor, she has, nevertheless, commuted between Albany and New York and kept her teaching position in New York. Constant and punctual in her attendance at the school, no personal nor political engagements elsewhere have lured her from her job. Her students have been the daughters of the upper middle classes, and of the very rich, but besides lecturing on history and superintending her pupils' knowledge of the past, she has led them on excursions in New York. With her pupils she has visited Ellis Island; the girls have gone with her to see a police line-up. She has peered at a great many of our institutions. I do not know if she has been moved to see them greatly altered.



She has a good name as a "liberal." When Stanwood Mencken tried to stampede a group of New York women whose names had been set down as sponsors for a luncheon to Countess Catherine Karolyi, charging that she had been friendly to the Communist regime in Hungary, and calling her the "Red Countess," Mrs. Roosevelt laughed. Mrs. James Gerard hastily withdrew her name; Mrs. Roosevelt as quickly gave out a public statement. "Of course I shall attend the luncheon. There is more danger in seeing red on every side than in being a little broadminded."

Those who want a liberal woman in the White House are apt to remember her disconcerting inquiry in the midst of much oratory on prosperity in 1924. "I should like to ask," she said, "whether the devastated northwest is still a part of the United States." It seemed then that Mrs. Roosevelt had that stipulated requirement for a woman chief . . . she could count the hungry and hear their cries afar off. To pay attention to the hungry, to wish to do something for them, to give public alms, recognizing the state's responsibility, that is, to be "liberal." To organize the hungry to make demands is, of course, another type of political life. Once Mrs. Roosevelt in a witty speech accused Senator Wadsworth of having a "Marie Antoinette type of mind," and some of her cohorts, those who had read a little about the French revolution, thought it was not quite the sort of thing she should even suggest.



It is true that Mrs. Roosevelt has no small talent for the phrase, and raising slogans is one factor, an important one, in political life. She took a stand not long since with a group agitating for a fund for aged teachers. She spoke against "mental and physical starvation of teachers." She is, you see, not afraid to call starvation, starvation; and it is presumed that the editor of "Babies, Just Babies," and the critic of the long continuing Republican policies, knows this: that real milk today and every day is the only test of whether the babies are getting a square deal. She has been the mother of babies, and immediacy of action is what the governor of babies has to bring to the job.

Woman-Elect

Babies don't eat words; they are not even suckled by lovely lullabies.

Looking over Mrs. Roosevelt's public utterances, I find her making excellent statements on the lowering of the tariff, talking as a consumer to a consumer, and indicating probable rises in prices to the consumer on a detailed list of articles, after the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Bill. I find her attending banquets of the Ort, which provides agricultural capital for Jews in eastern Europe. That may have been a "good politics" dinner, since so many Jewish New York voters are interested in the Ort, or it may have been because making small farms pay has been one of her own, and her husband's, interests in New York state. I find her supporting with money and services the Consumers' League; writing sound advice on marriage, beginning with the need for a program in married life, and the need for a budget, and for awareness that two people are not one person, and asking for generosity, and good manners. A very sensible article, indeed.

I do not know that she will make the country laugh. There are those who would like a mere belle and beauty in the White House, someone to set styles in sleeves, and length of skirts. Though no lady in the White House has done this, not even the chic Alice. Mrs. Roosevelt will probably go right on wearing good tailored clothes, and rather barbaric necklaces. The newspapers report her as buying two evening dresses a year. She will probably buy more; or she may go right on buying two.

We shall presently see whether any new thing is possible for a President's wife in the White House. At New York Democratic headquarters on the night of the election, with a mob, a well dressed, noisy, mixed and milling mob, Mrs. Roosevelt was calm. Fairly calm, that is. She shook hands quietly with innumerable people, she kissed a few old friends. She refused to give an interview until her husband had spoken. Then finally she said quietly, "You can't say you are pleased at a time like this. This is something to be approached in a serious mood. It will be a great responsibility, and a serious thing to undertake."



The dour observer who remarked of the "new deal," "It's the same old racket, and not even restrung," is the one I would like to discuss Presidential wives with. He would not be very hopeful that any single woman, however serious, could in the slightest affect the trend in politics. On the other hand, the Apaches have laid it down as a principle that any Chief needs a woman who can bring him news ahead of time of the problems to be met. And news of American problems Mrs. Roosevelt can certainly be depended upon to listen to. The women of the country have *her* ear. Whether what she has to tell the smiling President-elect will bring strain and the lines of intolerable responsibility into the hopeful countenance remains to be seen.

