

News Release

National Democratic
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THE FIRST
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT
INTERNATIONAL CAUCUS
OF WOMEN POLITICAL
LEADERS

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Remarks of Geraldine A. Ferraro

The First Eleanor Roosevelt International Caucus
Of Women Political Leaders

San Francisco

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Thank you, Brian, for that very kind introduction. I'm delighted to be here. This beautiful city, this building, this gathering, all have associated with them a personal nostalgia and proud history.

But today, I'm thinking of some history that precedes the lives of any of us here.

When I consider the importance of this gathering, I am reminded of how Napoleon inspired his troops at the battle of the pyramids by shouting to them--

"Soldiers! Forty centuries of history are staring down at you!"

My friends...As we open this First Eleanor Roosevelt International Caucus of Women Political Leaders, two thousand five hundred years of history, and the aspirations of hundreds of millions of women, are staring down upon us. For you see, that is how long democracy has labored to fulfill its basic promise of equal participation for all of its citizens.

It is rare that we can measure the differences between ancient times and modern. But in the case of women, we have a very precise measurement. The difference is five percent. In ancient Athens women were not permitted to hold office. Today, twenty five hundred years later, women hold five percent of the offices in the world's democracies.

We must do better. We are here together in San Francisco to design a global blueprint which will change that. We are here to define practical ways women can play a greater role in the political life of their countries.

Because of who each of you are, we are blessed with a dazzling wealth of personal experience to draw upon. Never before has so much talent, so much success, and so many political role models been gathered in one place at one time.

We are 70 women from 42 nations. Collectively we represent nearly a millennium of experience in the political life of our countries. Collectively we have borne the pain, shouldered the burdens, experienced the heartbreak and suffered the doubt of hundreds of failures and successes. But it is our individual experiences that we are here to share.

It is your stories which will inspire women the world over. As all of you know, the path to leadership is not an easy one. It isn't for men, why should it be any different for us? So we want to hear about and learn from your mistakes and failures as well as your successes.

That is why it is appropriate that we begin this historic caucus under the banner of Eleanor Roosevelt.

A statesman from the United States by the name of Adlai Stevenson once said that if democracy had saints, Eleanor Roosevelt would be among the first canonized. She inspired millions around the globe and yet she never seemed caught up in her own persona. I remember meeting her in 1961. Surrounding her were those people who find their importance by being around it. I was absolutely overwhelmed. She was bigger than life but yet at ease chatting with a young woman lawyer who was beginning to become involved in politics. She has remained my role model, not as much for her successes, which were many, but for the way she overcame the obstacles blocking her path to leadership.

Eleanor Roosevelt was the most admired woman in the world during the 12 years that Franklin Roosevelt was President. And yet, it was not simply because she was First Lady. Though she had tremendous pride in the contributions her family had made to the building of this country, and though she had been brought up to believe that women shared in those accomplishments only as wife or mother or child, she welcomed the possibility of women making their own mark. She considered politics the art of the possible, where goals had to be related to the means of achieving them.

And so, Eleanor Roosevelt, began as a young woman in the twenties, to speak out. She spoke out, not as the wife of the then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, but as Eleanor Roosevelt herself. And she did it as so many of us have spoken out. She spoke out with candor on suffrage and peace and she drew on her experiences in bringing up her children. It was during those early years that Eleanor Roosevelt learned one of the greatest secrets of leadership in a democracy--the involvement of others in the growth of the movements that her presence and spirit inspired. She was the pragmatist urging her followers to avoid panaceas and to grasp anything which was a step forward because all big changes in human history have been arrived at slowly and through many compromises. She was the idealist preaching that we cannot live for ourselves alone, that as long as we are here on earth, we are all of us brothers and sisters, regardless of race, creed or color. She was above all else, ahead of her time.

After the president died, Mrs. Roosevelt was unsure what life had in store for her. She assumed her political life was over. But some of her greatest accomplishments were yet to come.

As plans were being completed for the first session of the United Nations General Assembly in London, Mrs. Roosevelt received a call from President Truman asking her to represent the United States as our delegate. After a decent interval she intended to call him back...and refuse. She told her friends and family she had no international experience. Of course, that would never have stopped a man faced with the same offer. But finally she was persuaded to join the delegation because of President Roosevelt's great hopes for the U.N.

And so she went off to London. On her first day there a group of women came to see her. They were concerned because of the delegates and advisors from 51 nations who would be participating in Assembly, fewer than 20 were women. At her call, all crowded into her sitting room at Claridge's. With her as their leader, they called on the Secretariat to address their concerns. And so, on a bitterly cold winter day in January of 1946, the world women's party for equal rights issued its manifesto. It called on:

"Governments of the world to encourage women everywhere to take a more conscious part in national and international affairs and on women to come forward" to share in the problems of the postwar world as they had shared in the burdens of the war itself.

I truly believe that some of us are here today at the first International Caucus of Women Political Leaders, because of the actions those women in London took over 40 years ago.

Eleanor Roosevelt became immersed in her work agonizing over the violations of human rights which came to her attention. "When will our consciences grow so tender," she lamented, "That we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?"

She translated her concern into action in the drafting and passage of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That document has found its way into the constitutions of some of the nations represented here today. More important, it entered the consciousness of the people of the world. After Helen Keller read it in Braille, she told Mrs. Roosevelt: "My soul stood erect."

If some of us--or perhaps all of us--are here because of what a group of our sisters did in London 40 years ago, then I also hope we bring with us some of their pioneering spirit. When Eleanor Roosevelt went to India as part of a tour of developing nations, she was asked why she had come. Her response was, "I have come to learn."

And so have we here today. The President of a nation is going to talk to us...and the voice we will hear will be a woman's.

We will be addressed by a head of government...and she is a Prime Minister.

A Vice President of one of the oldest democracies in the world will speak with us...and that Vice President is a woman.

We are here to learn. We are here to share. We are here with a dedication to the future.

Just as the women in London did their work so that we might have a voice in our governments, we at this caucus do our work so that young women in villages in Africa, in cities and towns across Europe, Central America, Latin America, Asia, the United States and Canada, can one day walk in the corridors of power in their nation's capitols. Walk those corridors, not to petition for their rights, but to help shape the policies that will guide their countries.

We meet here today to try to provide a blueprint for greater participation by women in public life. And we have limited time in which to do it.

For the next two days we will examine the experience of women in political parties. We will define successful strategies for media coverage. We will compare notes on developing financial resources. We will talk about ways to build constituencies sympathetic to our cause and we will investigate how non-governmental organizations can offer support and encouragement to women in politics. These matters should be of interest to each and every one of us, regardless of party, regardless of ideology and regardless of national identity.

We will do this not by abstractions or demographics or computer print-outs. We will do it by tapping into the rich vein of experience you have brought with you to San Francisco.

Eleanor Roosevelt was only one woman. Yet she inspired millions.

Today we are 70 women and we have achieved successes Eleanor Roosevelt would not have dreamed of. Hopefully, through this conference, each of us will motivate other women to seek out the paths to leadership. Eleanor Roosevelt urged the appointment of women to policy making positions, because she felt that "Law, custom, and men's forgetfulness" were keeping women from equal opportunities in government and other jobs. And that the best results would always be obtained when men and women work together, with the recognition that their abilities and contributions may differ but that, in every field, they supplement each other. Today, we urge the involvement of women to policy making positions not necessarily because we are more caring, or more effective, or more intelligent or harder working...though that is probably all true. Rather, we do so because women add another dimension to the political process. According to Carol Gilligan, a Harvard Professor who has researched and written extensively on the subject, "Instead of engaging in confrontation, women are more apt to negotiate. Instead of looking at short term solutions to problems, women are more apt to think in terms of generations to come. Instead of thinking in win-lose terms, women are more apt to see the gray area in between."

And more women in government would mean stronger voices on issues that impact greater on women--like equal rights and reproductive freedom. This is as Eleanor Roosevelt called it "the special value women have to offer" in public policy debates.

And no one personifies that "special value" or has captured the world's imagination more since Eleanor Roosevelt than President Corazon Aquino. Like Mrs.

Roosevelt, she was a housewife and mother. Like Mrs. Roosevelt, her own political career began with the death of her husband. Like Mrs. Roosevelt, she speaks to her womanliness. When President Aquino wrote me about this Caucus, she emphasized her belief that it is our motherly instinct that impels women to protect our land, our home, our family and our community. It is, she believes, a natural impulse and gift from God. It is, she adds, a moral responsibility.

The same sentiment was expressed by Eleanor Roosevelt over 40 years ago. She felt that women, with their intuition, tact and feeling of thoughtfulness for others in the daily affairs of life, were naturally disposed toward a better understanding of the troubles of other nations.

As I look around this morning, I can't help but wonder how many Cory Aquinos my generation could have produced had we had so many successful role models. What would the world be like if women were equal partners in decision making? It is our responsibility to start the dialogue to make that happen. Today we declare that the days of doubt about the role of women in the leadership of nations is over. We do it in the name of a woman who even though she was thirty six years old before she was allowed to vote. We do it in the name of a woman who grabbed each challenge and ran with it. We do it in the name of a woman who even though she never ran for public office believed that when you cease to make a contribution you begin to die. We do it for the future.

Thank you.

Note: Much of the historical information for this speech was drawn from Life Was Meant to be Lived: A Centenary Portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt by Joseph P. Lash.