

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 16, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about the threat of communism in the United States. In the interview segment, ER's guest is humorist Abe Burrows.

Participants: Abe Burrows, ER, Elliott Roosevelt

[ER:] What was in the mail bag today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well this is rather a long question, but I think it's one that maybe should be discussed uh quite often. "Why is communism allowed to run rampant in this country? None of the freedoms should cover a horrible thing which most assuredly will destroy us if allowed to grow. To me it is like taking a poisonous viper and cuddling it to your bosom until it kills you with its own poison. Everything seems to indicate that is what communism is doing to the United States."

[ER:] I don't think uh communism is being allowed to run rampant in this country, and I don't see how you could fight it better than by teaching democracy and then allowing people to know everything there is to know about communism and realize that they prefer democracy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well of course----I'd like to interrupt at this point to say the only way that communism can possibly take over in this country is if a lot----a rather large segment of the population of America gets taken in by the propaganda, and I don't feel that the American people are gonna bite.

[ER:] Well I can't believe for a minute that the American people--any of them--are really um sold on communism if they know what it is. I think you find that a few intellectuals who are called Marxist because the original idea um of Karl Marx um which was to fight the evils of industrialism as he saw it in the days that he was in England in the early industrial revolution and where he hated to see a large number of poor people being uh trodden down by machines [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] that is really what he foresaw. Um, that's quite different from communism as practiced in the Kremlin today. So it's quite possible that among our intellectuals there are people whom we would consider uh liberals really wanting good of other people uh who might easily say they were Marxist and who might be accused of being Marxist. Um but when you uh actually talk communism as it is today in the USSR or in any country that the USSR dominates, and tell the truth about it to our people, I don't think you could sell it to any of us. And I think that there may be a few misguided people who were fooled and who do certain things that they uh are told of oh, they fall in love with some silly little girl did [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] and they pass along secrets and that sort of thing. But that's not really dangerous. What's dangerous is if your people, great masses of them, are so unhappy under their democracy that they're looking for something else to remedy [Elliott Roosevelt: Anything else.] the things that make them unhappy, then if they're promised things by the agents of communism, then they fall for those promises without realizing that they're not realities, they're just promises. (3:43)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, don't you think I mean I--I've thought a great deal about this subject and it seems to me that there are two ways in which communism can take over in this country. One is to have this country be uh subjugated uh by an invader--uh an invader who will come in and will take over the country by actually overrunning us and bringing us to our knees as a nation and as a people. [ER: Yes.] In which case, a few puppets, traitors may arise who will be willing to set up a puppet form of government. That is number one. Number two is if this country, if our democracy, uh goes through a period of

complete falling apart uh in our economic uh system so that great widespread unemployment comes about and the people become restless, and they feel that there is no future for our form of government, then they have two choices: the agents of communism will be definitely at work to sell them the communistic form of government [ER: So will the agents of Nazism and fascism.] Well the two to me are—o--one is the same as the other, both—one is a group of men who form a dictatorship, usually with a headman uh as the figurehead, and the other is one man who arises as a demagogue like Hitler or Mussolini, promises the world, and he does exactly the same thing that the communists in the Kremlin do. [ER: Yes. That's quite true.] Those are the two dangers that face our country. If we are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to defend our country and if we are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to ensure our own economic system's survival then neither of these things can come to pass and the few people who are communists in this country have very, very little to talk about, and barren soil to sow their seeds in. (6:00)

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[ER:] Also, we have to do--we have to do a little something to keep our um friends and allies in the world, because we can't remain a little island by ourselves with our own system we've got to have some friends and allies around us!

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I agree with that and I think that that is why uh we must realize that in order to preserve our system uh we have to make sure that the same thing is—

[ER:] That serves other people as well as ourselves. [Elliott Roosevelt: That, that's right.] Our economic system cannot serve just us. It must serve other people too. (6:37)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And also we must ensure that there is a growth of belief in our form of government throughout other parts of the world. We must have a-a--almost a crusading spirit about selling democracy, individual freedom—

[ER:] Yes, but we must do that by living it so well at home that the example sells itself.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That uh is of course the one thing that I think has been too little stressed all the way through uh in all of our dealings uh with these foreign nations and with uh the uh different programs that people object to in foreign nations we think entirely too little about the necessity of being an example and showing just how fast democracy can go ahead and can bring about the benefits to all Americans that we promised. (7:32)

[ER:] I think there's a very interesting um article that I happened to read this morning because the lady was a friend of mine, and um of the way one individual can work for democracy. I was reading on the way down um about Mrs. [Dorothy] Tilly, you know, she is the executive secretary of the um Methodist Church if I remember rightly. Anyway, the regional conference [ER Laughs] and um it was showing how she--she lives--lives in Atlanta, Georgia and uh she's sixty years old and I've known her for many years. She served on the President's Civil Rights Committee and Franklin Jr. said to me one day, "There's a wonderful uh um old lady"--I never think of her as old--[Elliott Roosevelt: I know! Elliott Roosevelt laughs] but that's the way he put it. "Old lady on the commission? Did you ever hear of her Mommy?" [ER Laughs] I said, "yes."

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But you had been working with her for over a quarter of a century!

[ER:] I had heard from her quite in a long while and um Mrs. Tilly is in herself I think, a living evidence of the way we can sell democracy because she has the courage to live it in the South just as we all should

have it wherever we live. And I um I think that article should be very widely read because it's something the-the South should be proud of.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well explain--explain a little to our audience because we have a moment left, uh just exactly how she's doing it because I think it's quite important that individuals get an idea of how they can contribute to making democracy work. (9:19)

[ER:] Well this article is in *Collier's Magazine* and um uh the girl who interviewed her went down evidently and stayed there and one thing I'll tell which I think is so characteristic of her: she went to a court where some taxi people were tried for the murder of a-of a Negro and it was just a sham and a joke, and she felt so badly about it that she formed a fellowship which she calls the fellowship of the concerned. You have no officers, you have no dues, but you sign a pledge that you will go to the courts in your county court place wherever it may be and listen and [ER laughs] by doing this it's gradually spreading to more and more places: they sign this pledge and then they have to go. And her idea was that if the good people in town knew what happened in their courts, the courts would grow better because there would be shame and there would be publicity when things went wrong. That's just one of the things she's done, which I think is so simple that it's almost a stroke of genius.

(Break from 10:33 to 10:46)

[ER:] Now we were talking about education and you said one thing that I want to come right back to. You said people wanted to be actors were sometimes unhappy because they didn't have an education. What do you mean by that?

[Abe Burrows:] Well I-I mean, I started to say about--that education has nothing to do with what you wanna be, it's part of making you a human being and you can be what you wanna be on top of that but the education will give you the base and the-the rounded [Abe Burrow coughs] thing you need to be a grown up happy human being. Uh an awful lot of youngsters write me letters steadily and they say--I got one the other day from a boy, fourteen-years-old, wants to be a comic, wants to know where to get material, wants to start right out and be young, and I told him forget it, grow up, go to school and when he becomes an actor he'll be a better one. When he becomes a comedian he'll be a better one. Uh in this new day, the growth of the new kind of comedy, of a literate kind of comedy uh where television and radio is eating up comedy by the yard and you have to create new stuff and that new stuff requires literacy. Uh it's no accident that Fred Allen is one of the best informed men I know. By education incidentally I don't necessarily mean uh a completely formal education, an awful lot of men who have taught themselves. [ER: Oh, oh yes.] I mean knowledge of the world, knowledge of the classics, knowledge of--Fred has a big knowledge of the classics, for instance. And you can't--let me see if I can give you example--you can't satirize Shakespeare unless you've read 'im. (12:26)

[ER:] No, of course you can't.

[Abe Burrows:] You can't do a joke--I've seen people satirize the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* very badly because they had never seen it, or read it, they didn't quite know what Romeo's second name was and they didn't know what the argument was between Romeo and Juliet. This is a practical thing about education, but the other thing, to be a-a human being, to know something about the world around, to be able to come home from a broadcast and pick up uh a book and sit down and read and not have to rush out to Lindy's and find out how you did. Not be miserable with yourself. [All laugh] To be happy with yourself I think is the most important thing in all of life, to teach yourself how to be good company to yourself. You know so few of us can be alone.(13:16)

[ER:] Yes, that's true and that's one of the unhappy things that very few people learn to be alone. Perhaps it is because they're so little alone when they're young. Now I was a very lonely child, I was alone an

enormous amount, but I've always been glad of that because my life has been thrown constantly with people but if I'm all alone, I can still be alone.

[Abe Burrows:] You meant--you mean that you were taught to rely on your own resources.

[ER:] And I was taught to read! I read whole days sometimes [Abe Burrows: Me too.] in a tree or on the ground or anywhere but uh I can still do that when I get the chance!

[Abe Burrows:] Me too. I-I-I read until I was dizzy but I'm so happy and I still have those books and you know, I've learned even the trick of being able, when my eyes are tired now and I'm very weary of-of thinking—

[ER:] Can you recite it to yourself?

[Abe Burrows:] Thinking it over to myself, you know? Taking a story and thinking it over. And-- and telling it to myself as it were. And it's-it's a great pleasure and a great form of--even if you want to use the word amusement. (14:23)

[ER:] But you see, there's something more than that. You uh have--you touched upon it before. You said we had to become whole human beings. We had to mature. Well now you see it's not just you and me as individuals. We have to mature, um but um we have to also um mature as a nation. I'm constantly interested in the fact that um you pick out some of the European nations, they're much more mature as a whole people than we are. And they are better, sometimes people say to you "Oh but um diplomatically, the United States is not able to meet certain things." That's not a question really of any individual. That's because, as yet, as a whole nation, we haven't matured in those ways.

[Abe Burrows:] Well we haven't developed a complete body of literature and a body of culture [ER: No.] We are very-very young. [ER: Very young!] Uh our-our nation as a--I guess we were really even after the Revolutionary War in 1776 we remained a British colony I guess about till about 1850 when we began to develop our own—

[ER:] Yes and then the men who built our nation then were very young men! They were very mature--much more mature for their ages than many people are today. (15:53)

[Abe Burrows:] But they were products of--of English culture [ER: They were products of a more mature culture]. Jefferson [ER: Jefferson] Jefferson, Paine, [ER: Washington, Paine] Washington, all were products of English culture, and so then we began to build our own culture [ER: Own culture] uh it's a very-very short time it's about a hundred years [ER: Just about] that's all, and-and to develop a body of literature and a body of thought and the movement that is—

[ER:] And to be sure of yourself in that context, you see.

[Abe Burrows:] I guess the secret of that is, you know, in Budd Schulberg's uh book, *The Disenchanted*, he makes a point about movement and people moving around. You know, European writers, uh when they write successes, remain where they are. American writers, an American writer, when he gets his show or a play, a play, or a book, and it's a big success, he instantly moves, and he moves away from the very place where he got the roots which enabled him to write this successful novel.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Abe, uh there's one thing: you're talking historically a good bit now on the uh subject of the importance of education. I'd like bring you back a little bit to humor and ask you what you feel the trends in humor are today. You mentioned Dean Swift, you mentioned Mark Twain uh coming down through the years, and now we are forced to develop very rapidly because of these new media, such as radio and television, a vast new supply of humor. What is the trend in humor today? (17:25)

[Abe Burrows:] Well, uh I think humor today is suffering a good deal from the mass production necessity. Um you never can produce real quality on that kinda basis. And so you need weekly shows and so fellows are reaching all over for material and for jokes and the quality is deteriorating very rapidly. I had a good example of uh-uh--I just did a show, *Guys and Dolls*. This isn't a plug because it's very hard to get tickets. [Abe Burrows laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] We should know, we should know! [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh]

[ER:] We know. We were going to try and take the children tonight. We know!

[Abe Burrows:] I had time on that one. I had time, and time to do it right. And the difference when you have time, and when you gotta do it every week is just appalling. Uh-uh this weekly stuff is-is got to make--must make humor much more mediocre. I don't think something can be more mediocre. Can it--can you use that word? More mediocre?

[Elliott Roosevelt :] Well [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] mediocre.

[Abe Burrows:] More mediocerer. But-but it has to supplement then you have a problem today. Satire, for instance, is very much reduced uh due to the political tension of our time. We are in a war period. We're in a period of war psychology and we have been, I guess, in--well, as long as I remember, since 1932, there has been war feelings throughout the world. This reduced the possibilities of satire. You cannot do sharp political satire at times like these. I don't think you can kid our government in a time like this. Uh, you can't ridicule--(19:03)

[ER:] You can kid though and I think you could do a lot of good by kidding the hysteria itself.

[Abe Burrows:] Well, there's a cha--I tell you, it-it kinda overlaps. There's a general air of-of-of--of tension that um makes it very difficult to do that. Uh, it becomes real serious, you know, there was a period during the uh during Hitler's fascism when they attempted to ridicule Hitler [ER: Yes, and they couldn't--]--you can't, you can't satirize fascism. You can't ridicule and you cannot destroy a dictator with ridicule. This has been proven many, many times. [ER No, you can't do that, that's true.] All through history, the men who killed the dictators and who destroyed the dictators were very serious men [ER: Serious--] who combined and finally threw them over. But uh Napoleon had people kidding him and nobody was able to bother him [ER: The little man on horseback--] [ER laughs] Eh, that's right. Um, um, Frederick the Great had a fellow named Voltaire who ribbed him, but who was also his friend. And uh you just, and-and ridiculing Hitler did not, as a matter of fact I-I think ridiculing Hitler did a lot of harm in the other direction because it made people uh less conscious of what a great menace he was. So I think--I think uh uh satire kinda is-is becoming [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] just kinda small in these days. I don't know it's a very difficult--(20:29)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But Abe, I have a feeling that out of the mass production the fact that people are reaching uh there are so many more people today who are thinking in terms of humor are having to produce it for their daily bread uh people who are reaching for it that out of it will come a tremendous amount of new uh and very virile and living humor that will rise to the top. I think for instance the rise of Will Rogers uh as the great humorist of the 1920s and early thirties uh was the result of the advent of the motion picture and of new media of expression and I feel that he combined uh in the production of his humor the ability to write it, the ability to do it on the stage, the ability to do it on the screen, and now you people are coming along who add to that, the television and the radio, and I think that out of it all will come very great high points in humor.

[Abe Burrows:] Of course, Rogers didn't suffer from the present day pressures I'm talking about he had great [ER: No.] security. Uh you know, I guess wit and humor require more security than any other form of expression. Uh when you're frightened--you watch a man who's frightened at a party and he'll be the least witty man at the party. Uh—

[ER:] I never thought about that, I guess fear does take away from your power of um of--seeing things as funny. (22:07)

[Abe Burrows:] A good example of that I think is women. Women uh who—who, because they were less secure for so many years there was a much smaller body of humor came out of women, and as women grow more secure you will see women taking their place as humorists, eh uh but when they were kept in a lesser position they weren't very witty, 'cause you can't be witty when you're frightened.

[ER:] I never thought of that: you're shy and you're frightened, and therefore, you haven't--I always felt that I lacked a sense of humor and I think perhaps that's the reason. I never thought of it.

[Abe Burrows:] Shyness and-and fright will stop your wit and uh uh you-you very seldom will hear a witty servant at a table [ER: That's true.] as he comes in to wait on a table he won't be very witty, he'll just say uh "the chops are burnt" or something. But he won't make a joke about it [Abe Burrow laughs].

[ER:] I think that's a wonderful thing. I have to draw this conversation to an end though I'd love to go on for a long time. And I want to thank you so much, Mr. Burrows. I've had a lovely time today.

[Abe Burrows:] Well, I have too.

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30 (70)

Transcribed by: Stavroula Pabst
First edit: Andreas Meyris
Final Edit: Mary Jo Binker
Final Check: Natalie Hall