

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 28, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about the class and educational dimensions of the military draft. In the interview segment, ER interviews author and theater critic John Mason Brown.

Participants: ER, Elliott, John Mason Brown

---

[ER:] Start it all over. Well Elliott I wonder what kind of questions you have to ask me today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I have a very interesting question from one of our listeners on Staten Island. Uh this lady has written in a- a letter and she's asked a very good and pertinent question of which I think you'll have a great deal of difficulty in answering. She says, "I have a small business and have not been able to send my son to college. He has graduated from high school and is now helping me to make a living. He's being drafted within the next month. Down the street from me is a man who has money. His son is in college, this boy was called a few months ago in the draft and was deferred because of being in college. I want to know why my son, who is helping me and the rest of the family, has to go instead of the boy who is not necessary to his family's financial welfare?"

[ER:] Of course, the answer to that question could only really be given by the draft board. The draft board is supposed to look in to every situation. There is no boy really whose family is happy when he goes. There's one reason or another why almost any boy should stay at home. It happens that our colleges have asked that boys who are in college, who are near the completion of their studies and if they are taking essential courses for a preparation of a kind that will be of value for the country eh shall be deferred because they can be more useful when their final graduation takes place. And they will fill positions then which are hard to have filled. I'm sorry to say that a boy who's just come out of high school and is helping, intensely valuable as he is to his family and to his mother um and your circumstances, is probably one, however, of many other boys who are in that same position and the draft board will find it very difficult to assess, in those cases, what boys should be allowed because the family can't get on without them under any circumstances-- to stay at home and what boys must be drafted even though it creates a hardship in the home. I'm--I realize that it seems unfair that your boy who couldn't have the advantage of college um seems to be chosen for a-a dangerous occupation um and the other boy seems to go free, but you must remember that its only temporary. That when the other boy is prepared he must go just the same and he may go into greater danger for the very reason that he will be prepared for certain things which your boy perhaps will not be prepared for.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] well uh the only—

[ER:] That might not be but it again might be.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] The only question that occurs to me is the question of uh the boy who is financially able to go to college and has no particular assets ahead of the boy who financially was ah forced to go to work to support his family, why ah that boy should be able to uh not to be called upon quite as quickly as the other boy?

[ER:] Well I don't think that the deferments asked for by the colleges um are unconditional deferments. I think they all have to be presented and passed upon by the draft board, but when the school actually asks

for deferment they must have a reason why they think it is um a wise thing to do. Now that doesn't always mean, because we know sometimes people try to use influence sometimes they do that, in the case of pure friendship sometimes, or some other reason and that's a side of human nature that's um difficult to prevent coming in to play though it should never come in to play, but nevertheless, um I believe that it is supposed to be um considered only for deferment if a boy has a very short time before he finishes or if he is doing something that is preparing him for a job that is an essential job that they're finding it hard to find qualified people to fill.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words, ah your draft board is supposed to take in to consideration when you're a college student if you're a specialist in a field. (5:44)

[ER:] I would think so, at least that is my understanding of what that requires.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What about the boy that ah we'll say was not a very good student in school uh and ah and yet he passed his college entrance board examinations and was allowed to go to a university. Ah does the board take the recommendation of the college or the request of the parents?

[ER:] Oh I think the recommendation of the college. I think you have to show that the college considers this boy is worthy of--is- is worthwhile material.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words then it really isn't a question of the financial position of the boy or his parents, it's a question of his own ability and his own ah need as far the opinion of the school to which he has gone.

[ER:] Well you know, you know what's happening in the colleges today? I just heard from one-- somebody about it the other day the um standing of the boys is taken in to consideration, the boys of very high standing have a better chance for exemption than the boys of poor standing and suddenly, every boy apparently is working his head off because he would like to get very high standing and finish his college and so someone told me the other day that the uh it was the most astounding change in university circles, the boys who had played and shown very little ability suddenly were getting the highest grades that could possibly be achieved in the courses they had taken so um that is-- was evidence to me that in this thing there is some discrimination you see being used. (7:38)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well you know I think there's one more point that should be brought out and that is that the boy who uh did not have the financial ability to ah continue into a college education and he had to quit school in order to support his family ah that it should be pointed out that those boys do have the opportunity where they're able to prove that they are the main support of the family that they have dependents and they get certain allowances from the government when they enter the military service. I happen to know of a, of a- a GI for instance who ah was only too delighted to go into the military service. He was married and had a great number of children and he earned far more money than he could possibly earn in private industry because of all the allowances he had for dependents and I think that ah where a boy is the mainstay and support of his family that the government does take that in to consideration.

[ER:] Well as I understand this particular question the boy was not the mainstay, the boy was helping now, where the mother had put in probably very hard work over a long period of years to allow him to stay through high school and quite naturally it's hard for her now to find that he's taken away just as she thought her hardest years were over, but that is probably the position of a great many other women at the present time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, that's true but also uh there is a certain compensation. The boy could not ah go through college and the military service training which he will have, in my opinion will prove of great value to him in the years to come in his business life. (9:42)

[ER:] Well that may be. That's quite possible and I hope it is so.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well uh I of course I don't think this is a very satisfactory answer to the poor lady who has written in this letter uh because I think that she feels that there was a certain discrimination because—

[ER:] Well that's as far as possible must be avoided but it can be avoided only by the draft board, none of us can answer that question of the draft board's responsibility.

(Break 10:11-10:30)

[ER:] My guest today is a man who departed from writing about the make believe of the theater as a drama critic, to as he puts it to connect the make believe with the real, the particular with the general. With me this afternoon is Mr. John Mason Brown, also well known to the radio and television audiences as well as being an author, Mr. Brown.

[Mr. John Brown:] Mrs. Roosevelt I am delighted to be here but do not recognize myself at all. [ER laughs]

[ER:] I'm certainly glad to have you here. There is so much talk about you, Mr. Brown that I think I'll begin by probing into your personal life as a writer. Now you've just finished a book and everyone talks to me about it, so I'd like to know how you started writing as a drama critic, what in your background prompted you to enter this career? (11:31)

[John Brown:] Well years ago Mrs. Roosevelt when I was at Harvard ah Professor [George Pierce] Baker was teaching drama and Heywood Broun used to say that best thing that Baker ever did at Harvard was not to produce [Eugene] O'Neill or Beh- - or S.N. Behrman or the other playwrights but to produce what he called, dramatic cures, people who had had one bad play produced and realized that they were no threat to Shakespeare or O'Neill [ER laughs] and I'm a cure.

[ER:] And you're a cure [ER laughs] But a good many people [ER clears throat] who have tried to write plays turn out to be very good critics. Now how does that happen?

[Mr. Brown:] Well I think an awful lot of people remain critics who can't write plays, and sometimes because people like Mr. [George Bernard] Shaw and this season Mr. Wolcott Gibbs do manage to make uh that bridge, that uh to really step across the almost unbridgeable gulf between criticism and creative writing, it does happen. (12:24)

[ER:] it's um well but you've done that too haven't you? Because now ah you've um--well I don't know that you've stopped being a critic because I think you still criticize, but ah you do now write um books.

[John Brown:] I don't think Mrs. Roosevelt-- you're very kind-- but I don't really think you can write books without being creative, I don't think I've ever been a creative writer I've only been creative in my family. I have two children.

[ER:] Well I love the book about your children [laughter] you know you promised me once you'd write a book about Fala and you've never done it .

[John Brown and ER overlap]

[John Brown:] I'm still going too but I have to—

[ER:] You're still going too.

[John Brown:] I- I have to learn a lot

[ER:] I wonder what's left for you to write about Fala but I think perhaps you'll find something, that's what interests me. [laughter]

[John Brown:] Oh I think there's an awful lot to be said through Fala's eyes and ears, and nose, and about the absurdity of man as seen through the wisdom of a dog.

[ER:] He's getting very- very dignified and rather ancient so you'll have to do it soon.

[John Brown:] Well he and I must be contemporaries. [John Brown laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] as a matter of fact eh this has rather shocked me because uh I have been talking with a great friend of mine about collaborating on a book uh supposedly written by Fala of how all the people that Mother and Father have met over the years looked from two feet up. (13:41)

[ER:] But you know very well that there are two books about Fala already.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I'm not talking about writing a book about Fala, I'm talking about writing a book through Fala's eyes. Fala supposedly speaking and giving his thoughts about how all the rest of you look from his angle. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[John Brown:] Well there is a really fine book in Fala and—

[ER interrupting:] I think it would be conditioned how-how many of us have given him tidbits of meals. [ER laughs]

[John Brown:] Well Mrs. Roosevelt, the reason I never really had the courage to do the book is because that book either has to be really right or its terrible. There's no in between and I never had the cour-- I never really had the audacity to feel that I could make it as right as it should be. [ER and John Brown laugh] (14:08)

[ER:] Well that's quite wonderful, but I now still want to get back to you, while you were on the staffs of Theater Arts and the World Telegram you traveled a good deal throughout the United States, didn't you?

[John Brown:] Yes, well Mrs. Roosevelt we had that in common [John Brown laughs].

[ER:] Well did you do this because you really wanted to do it or did you do it because it was a job that had to be done?

[John Brown:] well I had—

[ER overlapping:] It was part of your job.

[John Brown:] Well I don't have any Bedouin blood, but I do like to travel even as I suspect you do and it was part of a job eh to be done and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

[ER:] Well you know it's rather funny, I think I like to travel but I've lost what I had when I was young. Which was just um a- a tremendous curiosity about any new place. I didn't care, I think if anybody had asked me to go anywhere I would never have asked whether it was easy to get to or um uh just anything about just the mere fact they asked me to go somewhere new, I would have gone when I was young, but nowadays uh I don't find that that attracts me quite in the same way. [ER laughs]

[John Brown:] Now- now I- I agree with you completely but I still find a certain excitement in not only the change of scene but in the escape from the New York telephone and also a wonderful release in a hotel room when you can say do not disturb until five-thirty this afternoon, no telephone calls, and go to bed, [laughter] I like to travel to nap.

[ER and John Brown overlap]

[ER:] Well that I've really never tried to do—

[John Brown:] And read.

[ER:] I've never tried to do that, but um and I'm not very fond of hotels but on the other hand I um I'm-- I'm still fond of um finding myself in some place where I do know uh the people or the language a little-- I like it better if I know the language it's easier to get around. And where I can go around a new place and get to know about the place and the people and look at things, I still like that.

[John Brown:] Well the reason that I dig in in hotels Mrs. Roosevelt is because I have had the uh-- shall I say the terror of following you, in so many cities and hearing about your routine [laughter] and knowing how enormous is your energy and that I have always pretended to be an instant invalid and gone to bed because I know I could never keep up with you.

[ER:] Well that isn't uh, I don't call what I've done lately really traveling because, uh I've gone to do some- some job usually and eh that is- that is not travelling for- for pleasure for your own.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I'll take issue. I'll take issue. She decided uh last spring that she was going to educate her grandchildren so she decided on a trip to Europe to educate my two oldest children. It ended up of course that she went for the State Department and she made speeches for the State Department and uh we just traped around and listened to speeches but and attended formal functions my children and I-- but and when she tells you that she doesn't like to travel to new places she's been badgering me all summer long and all last spring because she's wanted to go to the Near East and to India and Pakistan for the last year and she says now how can we arrange it so I can still go [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] and do all the other things that I have to do? (17:51)

[John Brown:] Well Mr. Roosevelt I remember being in England in the war, when Mrs. Roosevelt came over and I—

[ER:] Ah but I had a job.

[John Brown:] A job? You certainly did and I-- and magnificently you did it.

[ER:] That's what I came for.

[John Brown:] But I remember looking at the poor bedraggled members of the press that followed you around England trying to keep up with you and they said every day—

[ER:] I saw Leslie Storm the other day who's got a play on here now and she came in and- and she was one of them and she remembered it with some agony I think.

[John Brown:] Well I always loved the way you took them through factory after factory after factory on inspection tour then went to a public luncheon and then you would say now you all better get a little bit of rest because I have to do My Day and I'll have you called at three o'clock and then they tired but refreshed would continue and you absolutely untired and unrefreshed, but fresh as could be ah would keep on going. [John Brown laughs]

[ER:] Well but that that was a very short time and that was- was uh what I'd gone to do. I'd gone to be busy, but of course you um I know I remember now you were in- in London you were there on duty with the navy weren't you?

[John Brown:] I was yes.

[ER:] And that must have, uh you went to both the invasions of Sicily and Normandy.

[John Brown:] I was on the staff at that time of Admiral [Alan Goodrich] Kirk.

[ER:] And didn't you do the announcing from there? It seems to me that I remember—

[John Brown:] uh I did do what was known as bridge announcing, yes.

[ER:] I remember that now.

[John Brown:] And it was for me it was an exciting assignment blessedly it allowed me still to function as a wind instrument ah which is congenial eh and southern uh but it was under those circumstances particularly exciting. (19:31)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What's bridge announcing? I'm not a navy man myself.

[John Brown:] I know ah [John Brown laughs] well Mr. Roosevelt the-the uh Admiral Kirk's theory was that only one man out of ten on a really large ship can see what is happening and the theory was that you get over a loud speaker a day by day thing, as you were moving into action and then through the battle told what was happening during the engagement, whenever planes came or whatever came over or whatever it was.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm.

[ER:] yes I remember- I remember. Now how is it that I seem to have such a, did you tell about this, or write about it or something because

[John Brown:] There's a book, called To All Hands.

[ER:] oh that's it, because I seem to, I feel as though I'd seen it or heard it [laughter].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Did you say that you did this in Sicily?

[John Brown:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Oh I hope you didn't have to report which planes were dropping those [overlap] uh were [John Brown: I remember that night.] flying over and were getting fired upon.

[John Brown:] I don't mean to go in to the air force which is your particular baby but I do remember that night and I do remember the horror of when the Germ--American planes came out and the Germans came out at the same time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yeah.

[John Brown:] and as I remember if you forgive me as I remember the Americans took a short cut across the fleet [Elliott Roosevelt: that's right] and unfortunately the Germans came out at the same time and there was—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Terrible mix up.

[John Brown:] Awful mix-up.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh all our airborne forces ah suffered big casualties that night-- all of our paratroopers because the-- they thought they were firing on the Germans but they managed to get the transports.

[John Brown:] That was right.

[ER:] Well did this war experience change your outlook in your thinking in the matter of writing?

[John Brown:] Well I hope it did, I don't see how anybody could go through it at any age eh without having a completely new approach to life. I in the before then had really been staged struck which is sort of condition being dropped out of a cradle on your head uh and uh from then on then the whole attitude was changed. I mean it wasn't as you said at the beginning, the make believe thing it last its ultimate appeal and became only part of an interest.

[ER:] Well did you go back to criticizing the drama or did you--?

[John Brown:] I went back to uh criticism but not only the theater because that was one of the advantages of the job that I, now-- it is one of the advantages of the job I now have with the Saturday review.

[ER:] Mhm, well we'll have to stop and go on a little later.

(Break 21:57-22:00)

[ER:] You were talking Mr. Brown about your present job tell me a little more about it.

[John Brown:] One of the--from my point of view one of the advantages, really one of the privileges and releases of the job that I have on the Saturday Review is that I have a weekly column which can be on almost any subject, it has ranged from Charles Lamb to the Nuremburg trials.

[ER:] I've been reading it. [ER laughs]

[John Brown:] And, that's what I like about it, you can do the play that you want to do, but if its play or a or a film that makes no, that has no critical point, to be made about than you leave it alone and write about your children or Nuremburg or race troubles or whatever it may be that happens to interest you.

[ER:] Yes well that that does give you a much wider play doesn't it? It's-it's much easier and more interesting to do.

[John Brown:] Well I find it myself-it's much--alas it seems to me harder to do --I for fourteen years did a daily uh column for newspapers and then you lived-- I lived under the pressure of uh time but now I live under the pressure of the calendar having too much time and that's almost worse.

[ER:] Well I find it's easier to do something every day than to do it once a week.

[John Brown:] Do you find writing easy Mrs. Roosevelt?

[ER:] Writing my column is easy because I've done it so long it's in the nature--a little bit of a diary you see, because it's something that I happen to have seen or been interested in or done in that day and that makes it easier, but um ah if I did it once a week I think I'd die.

[John Brown:] Now Mrs. Roosevelt may I ask a question?

[ER:] Yes.

[John Brown:] How much time, how long a time does it actually take you to write My Day?

[ER:] You see I don't write it which makes a difference, it's only four hundred and fifty words and I dictate it, and uh so it's just like talking you see, I just dictate those four hundred and fifty words and then I correct what I've dictated and then um it's copied and goes off. I think the whole thing probably doesn't take-- um oh varies of course with the- the particular thing sometimes you have to take a little more trouble but I have written a column in as little as half an hour.

[John Brown:] Oh [John Brown laughs].

[ER:] but that of course is- is- is when you're really under pressure. You must. (24:20)

[John Brown:] With this, with Technicolor you would see me green with envy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well and I can uh-

[ER:] No because I don't write you know there's an awful joke on me, my children think it's a wonderful joke that some nice young student once made a study of the age you have to be to read different columns and um Mr. [Arthur] Krock and Mr. [Walter] Lippmann of course you have to have at least two year of college to read, but when they got down to me you only had to have a fifth grade education so [ER laughs] the kids have always laughed at me [overlap] and I think that's probably one reason why I do it so fast.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I don't- I don't think we've laughed at you we've been envious of the fact that you've eh gotten the-- your language so simplified that it was easy to read [ER: Well] most of us have never achieved that even in talking but I—

[ER:][Overlapping] well that's just crazy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I will say one thing in addition to that, mother writes enumerable articles and I have seen her with my own eyes turn out a thirty-five hundred word article on an assigned topic in a period of uh two hours with the greatest of ease.

[John Brown:] But that really comes from having your thoughts entirely mobilized in advance doesn't it?

[ER:] Oh Yes, you have to know exactly what you want to say before you start, but um I think the-- I think the my really best training was writing scripts for the radio because I got them all returned to me at first. Years ago, oh every time I wrote a script it came back to me and they said uh please put this in to proper um words that people can understand and please don't make sentences which sound like German instead of English and finally [ER laughs] I got perhaps so that I could write something that was--and perhaps I've simplified it too much now.

[John Brown:] Well I read only this afternoon a line by Mr. Shaw in which Mr. Shaw said that his ideal of writing for full impact had always been to write such simple English, no matter how big the words or how long the sentences-- English so simple to follow that any Frenchman with a dictionary could read it and understand it at once. (26:35)

[ER:] [ER laughs] Well that that perhaps is even harder to do I don't know I've never tried that, but why do you say its pleasant agony to write, Mr. Brown?

[John Brown:] Well uh perhaps let's begin with the agony. I don't happen to have your fluency and I find that it is shear torture trying to say precisely what is on your mind and to try to get in the-- from the back of your mind, if you have a mind and I haven't, try to dig up this thing and bring it so-so that you have said as you want to say it, as you know it ought to be said, seems to me to be shear agony and that is the the full arrangement of a story so that the lead is really the inevitable lead, the right lead, and so that the words are not just any words but the word.

[ER:] Well that's why a weekly thing is harder than a daily thing, because you can't do that in a daily thing. You- you can't um really try for perfection, you've got to do what uh what you can give in the time you have, in the words you have.(27: 18)

[John Brown:] Well I- I don't know I-I think you admirably succeeded and certainly in the books you have done it uh completely this I remember that is fine.

[ER and Brown overlap]

[ER:]But that's very kind of you to say.

[John Brown:] Fine job.

[ER:] But I can see what effort your make.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother ah you know I'd like to interrupt for just a minute to ask John Mason Brown a question, because several days ago we had a gentlemen on as a guest who made a very spirited defense of a--what he called a modern type of literature and I seem to remember that you at one time debated with this gentleman on that topic.

[John Brown: ]Are you talking about Mr. Al Capp?

[Elliott Roosevelt:]And I'm talking about Lil' [laughter] Abner Al Capp and uh as a matter of fact uh only recently uh he uh was on the cover of Time ah and uh he was played up as ah a man of letters who is ah or rather he in his opinion has created a new form of literature ah he and his fellow comic strip uh writers and I'd like to have just a few words from you along that line as to what you consider is happening to the American youth of today through the reading of comic books and comic strips.

[John Brown:] Ah Mr. Roosevelt you asked me two or three question at once let me quickly say that I happen to as uh person to person ah like and admire Al Capp. He has a really far ranging mind and a deeply intelligent one and anyone who read the Shmoo book knows that he also has a superb sense of comic invention but I cannot ah the things that irritate me-- irritate is an understatement-- that appall, anger, infuriate me, are the comics that are the bound comics the books I don't mind the comic strips but I hate those little pink, blue, green and hideously colored polychrome horrors that creep in to every home and Mr. Capp of course-- uh he has there's no question about it has created as you say a form of literature. Let's say he's ah created a absolutely new excuse for going to the oculist ah that he that is one of the best time wasters that I know of. It does provide a vocabulary, it does in certain instances show a- a fine sense of humor but what bothers me and I don't mean to attack Mr. Capp or the comic strips on the basis of what they are, what bothers me is that from the point of view of a parent is what children could be reading if they didn't feel they were obliged to read it ah.

[ER:] Of course he practically told me that there wasn't any value anymore in reading any of the classes which distresses me because I like them.

[John Brown:] Well, I-- Mrs. Roosevelt the thing is that Mr.--the thing is that distresses me in the comic strip form is the misunderstanding of what makes a classic. Let's turn from Mr. Capp now to one of the so called classic comics, as you know they have taken the bible and reduced it to dog patch, they have taken Hamlet and they have done the same thing to Macbeth and the- the- the error there is the error of assuming that if you have a bad ah line of the uh the English language is destroyed plus the bad drawing and only the horror left that you have the equivalent of a great uh work of literature (31:16)

[ER:] Well I couldn't agree with you anymore but evidently we are rather in the minority these days and I hate to bring this to an end, because unfortunately there is a great deal more you and I could talk about thank you ever so much for coming.

[John Brown:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(31:37)

---

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)  
File(s): 72-30(35)

Transcription: Daniella Amell  
First Edit: RMann  
Final Edit: Andreas Meyris  
Final check by Natalie Hall