THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 15, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about military manpower and conscription during the Korean War. In the interview segment, ER's guest is radio show host Mary Margaret McBride.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Mary Margaret McBride.

[Elliot Roosevelt:] [Away from mic] This- is not about President Truman.

[ER:] Well Elliott, what is in the mail today?

Elliot Roosevelt:] Well, there's a letter from a Mrs. Sylvia Burkowitz of uh Brooklyn, New York. And she's written in and has asked, "I have a brother who is in Korea. Either we have a peaceful settlement quickly or a total war for everybody, and not just for a few. Our boys are getting killed while the president attends the Navy football game. Three US senators say the boys in Korea will not get any more reinforcements. I can't sleep worrying about this terrible mess. Does it pay to be patriotic and a reservist? Yes, to be killed on a battlefield without any help! Five and a half years in World War Two, and now one of the first to go while more physically able specimens are enjoying themselves and still on UMT Plan. My brother is thirty-four. When is he going to be able to pick up the threads of his life? When is--- when he is forty? Too old to get a job? Please try and do something before it is too late. Please. Sincerely, Mrs. Sylvia Burkowitz. PS: Perhaps you know the answer."

[ER:] Well, I think that is a letter that has a good many rather important points in it. Um, I would say, for instance, that what you really needed was someone to bring some kind of order out of the chaos of manpower. [Elliot Roosevelt: Mhm] You see, a man who's been five and a half years in the service should not be the first to go even if he is in reserve -- if he is a reservist. And a man of that age, particularly, should not be- undoubtedly, when they called him, he had a skill which was useful and they took him. But it's more likely that it was just a man they picked up, because they weren't doing a really good analysis [Elliot Roosevelt: Mhm] of background. The draft boards can't be trusted to do that. There have to be some rules worked out by which uh certain people automatically are deferred until [coughs] if you have an all-out war and everybody is mobilized to do the thing that they can do best, that's a different thing. [Elliot Roosevelt: Yeah.] That's question number one and I hope very much that uh Anna Rosenberg uh will be able to do that. She's perfectly qualified to do it if she is permitted to do a good job.

[Elliot Roosevelt:] All right, what about uh this one question that says three US senators say the boys in Korea will not get any more reinforcements. [ER:] I don't think that [Elliot Roosevelt:] It does look as though [ER:] they had any idea what they were talking about! Who knows whether they'll get reinforcements or not? The question is whether they stay-- ay in Korea or whether they are pulled out. [Elliot Roosevelt: Mhm.] If they are pulled out, then no reinforcements needed. If they're staying there, there'll have to be reinforcements! And, it seems to me that senators sometimes do a good deal of talking about things that really, is not their particular bailiwick and, in all probability they didn't really actually know. But now on the point.

[Elliot Roosevelt:] Of the president attending a Navy football game.
[ER:] Yes. Now that is something that I would like to have you eh stop and think about a minute. Eh, a whole nation is under tension. Suppose we were in an all-out war, and each of us had a job, and each of us were very busy. We would still need to go on with certain types of relaxation. We would need to do certain things simply to change the course of our thinking every now and then. I heard someone berate the British people in the war because they were having dog shows. And here everybody was short of petrol, and here people couldn't get enough to eat. Where did they get food for dogs, and why did they have dog shows? And I heard a very wise person in England say that dog shows kept up morale. Dog shows was something you'd always had; you'd always cared about dogs, and you'd always been interested in them. And for a short time, in seeing the dogs, and going to the dog show, you forgot the thing that ate into your heart, that dogged your footsteps, that terrified you very often eh for hours of the day or night. And I've known people who went through the worst bombing times in England who went to the theater for no purpose in the world except to get that few minutes of change from the tension that they lived under. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] Now, no one knows what tension a man who is president of the United States is under, because, in the last analysis, whatever decisions are made are his decisions. He can take all the advice from experts, and get all the information in the world, but the final decision is his and he can't get away from it. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And that will get a lot of people. Believe me, it's no easy thing to carry. And I think you better be very grateful that the president of the United States goes to the football game, because he can crack up just as easily as he could go to the football game, and it's better to go to the football game for the value that he is to the people of the country. (6:46)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well I-I certainly agree with that point of view. But I'd like to uh go on to one of the questions that was asked at the end of this letter which I think is of extreme importance to many young people in this country. And that is uh the question of the ability of a youngster to pick up the threads of his life, when he's already past the stage when ordinarily he would have been well established in a permanent uh way of life in an earning power, and to start off at-uh--in this case, it's almost forty years of age. Uh, it's pretty tough.

[ER:] It's very tough, and that's one of the reasons why I said at that age, um and with those years behind him of service, he should be deferred till the very last minute. If the um-um--if it's an all-out war, then everybody's future is at stake, and whether he has any or hasn't any there's nothing we can do about it because it's war for survival and there'll be--everybody will be in it. Um, the thing I think that-that people really have a right to resent is when a man goes off into the army, and then he has to come back and compete with men who didn't go into the army. Sometimes men who had very slight physical defects which don't impede their doing the civilian things, and then they are ahead, there's no question about it. And it's always seemed to me that there ought to be some way of compensating--some way of using those years--which do give men a great uh deal of experience and a knowledge of-often people. Which ought to be valuable in business. You ought to be able to jump those men a certain amount ahead. I've always thought there was bad management somewhere in that whole scheme of things because they should not have to suffer for having um been willing to give up certain years of their lives.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I've got just one more question. In the last war I used to have uh great many able-bodied boys who were assigned to jobs as clerks in the headquarters, and were assigned to jobs as mechanics and various ground jobs in my outfit, and they had to qualify with the same physical qualifications that a combat soldier on the front lines had to qualify. (9:47)

[ER:] That's all wrong, you see.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well why is it that our government is sl-is so slow to recognize the stupidity of that type of approach?
[ER:] Well, I don't know. But it-it's nonsense because a man can qualify for certain um clerical jobs or ground jobs. I suppose the real--[Elliott Roosevelt: Certainly, there were many--] I suppose the real answer is this: that they don't know, when they take them in, whether having taken them into those jobs they may not be called upon suddenly, for some extraordinary [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] eh [Elliott Roosevelt:] Certainly that's true-- situation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But I know-I know boys-boys who were 4F, [ER: And then they would eh cave in.] who were declared 4F, and worked in armament factories at very, very high wages, which were equivalent to the same jobs as boys who worked in my command and the maintenance of aircraft. And eh a boy who uh had maybe a slight defect in his hearing, or he had some other defect of a relatively minor character--flat feet and uh for instance eh, difficulty in shortsightedness--those boys were deferred, and they took high-paying jobs. And the boy that had perfect physical equipment he was put into a job, sure, he can be called upon to defend himself, uh upon certain circumstances. But I think that you can train the boy that's shortsighted, that has flat feet, that has other minor defects to defend himself just as well in an emergency as the able-bodied citizen.

[ER:] Well I wasn't thinking so much about an emergency, but suppose for instance that you had a boy um like that eh out in Korea, let's say. Suppose his job was to be a mechanic but he happened to have to take uh the retreat march. Well, he'd cave in, very likely, and that I think is what keeps them from talking them into the army. But I believe that it could be worked out that those men would be in relatively safe places.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Not only that, but they can be placed right in the continental United States. We have huge air force establishments where we need mechanics.

[ER:] Well that-that's where I think it should be.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I'm afraid our time is well over time by now, [Both laugh] so I'm afraid uh if you don't mind, maybe we better go on to another part of the program.

[ER:] All right. (12:25)

[Break 12:25-12:38]

[ER:] I think this is a very proud moment for me because I have often been interviewed by the lady I am shortly to introduce to you, but for the first time I'm going to have the fun of interviewing her. So I introduce to you all Mary Margaret McBride!

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Who is just as scared as can be Mrs. Roosevelt, I'd much rather interview you!

[ER:] Ooh! [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] Well, now I'm going to have fun. I know you've been wonderful to me many times, and uh I don't believe I could possibly be eh as nice to you as you have often been to me. But nevertheless, I think we're going to have fun for our audience just in talking together. First of all, I'd like to ask you something which I've always wondered about. I think you do more real work than anyone I know. First about the things which you um actually recommend on your program, and someone said to me once, which I'd never even thought of, that you never recommended anything you hadn't actually looked into yourself. Is that true?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Oh yes, it's true. You know, it-it started wh-when I first began radio I found out that you weren't really supposed-that you just were supposed to take things and do 'em, and I couldn't. I'm only enthusiastic about the things I really like, and I'm sometimes considered a little gushy when I
really like--I think *Time* magazine said I even gushed about you, Mrs. Roosevelt. [ER: Ooh!] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] I said you were the greatest woman in the world, they said I gushed. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] But I always mean it. I mean-I mean all the things I say and I can't say 'em unless I mean 'em, and if I mean 'em I've got to be rather strong about it.

[ER:] Well, but that must take a tremendous organization. Now how-how do you organize to do the amount of work that you do?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well as you know, I have a woman manager, Stella Karn, who-who's been my manager for many years and who agrees with me, luckily, about--that I have to like a thing. So she starts out that way, somebody comes to her and wants to go on the program, wants to put a product on, and she says, "Well, we'll take it up with Mary Margaret," but first she investigates it, she finds out that it's all right, but that really doesn't always mean that it's all right with me. [ER: I see.] I have to fall in love with it.

[ER:] Well then, she arranges for you to go and see it, or?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Yes.

[ER:] And then you fall in love with it, [Mary Margaret McBride: Yeah.] that's-that's a very good [laughs] way to put it, I think!

[Mary Margaret McBride:] And then I--and then after that I'm a very loyal and devoted buyer.

[ER:] You try it and make sure that it really, it is up to your expectations [laughs]

[Mary Margaret McBride:] And if it's something to eat, I eat it constantly. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] And have a very good time doing it.

[ER:] Well, that's good uh [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] that's a good thing, if it's something to eat. But I'm-I'm amused with what you say about having to fall in love with it, because I think sometimes uh it's as easy to fall out of love with something as it is to fall in love with it! Does that ever happen to you?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well if it-if it lets you down. We've actually put products off the program if they-if they did let us down. You see, then you stand guaranteed for that product to your listeners, and your listeners trust you; and if anything happens then you have to keep on standing for the listeners. Y-you [ER: Well I--] then have to let down the loved one, I guess [Mary Margaret McBride laughs].

[ER:] Well now I-I think that uh that's really very interesting, because now you've told me you have a woman manager who feels as you do, and makes the arrangements for you to do your job. But now, for instance, who keeps you up to finding out as much as you do about the people you're going to interview? I remember coming on your program and having you have the book that you were going to talk about in front of you marked with little papers in, showing that you had actually read that before I came on. Now I call that real, hard work.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well you-you're very kind to say there were pieces of paper--what really happened, I'm afraid, unless I just valued your book so much which I certainly did that I hadn't turned down the pages. [ER: Marked it with a pencil?] But I usually turn down the pages, that awful thing that book lovers [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] just say is miserable to do, and then I mark certain passages. I read it, turning down pages and marking and then I go through it again. [ER: But you read it, that's--!] Oh, I read every word of it. I-I knew your book as well as you did almost that-that time.
[ER:] Well, I think, it's uh--of course you knew it probably a great deal better, because once I've written something I always find that when I reread it it's like something new to me. And that's why after I've written it, and gone over it a number of times--the last ah book I wrote, I went over so many times, and each time I changed it because it was like something new, until finally my poor secretary said: "I'm not going to give back those chapters [ER laughs] you've been over them nine times." [ER laughs]. You knew it I'm sure better than I did because I always remember all the nine times. [ER laughs].

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Oh, somebody was just telling me--telling me that Henry Morgenthau was surprised when I knew his book, and he felt, too, that he didn't know it as well. That happens because you haven't seen it for a long time, and as you say, you may have changed it a good many times, but I always allow for that. I'm al--I never ask a question that I don't know the answer to. So if I see that blank look coming into the eyes of the person opposite, I take them out of it. I tell a story.

[ER:] You tell a sto--Aren't you wonderful, well now that's what I mean by what hard work you've done. You see, you acquaint yourself so well with everything you're going to talk about. You do um, do you have anyone who keep you up to reading, or rather who gets you the things and who finds the time in your day for you to do that?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] No, I have a-a reporter--again, a woman, I see that you all have men around here. I think it's very interesting, [Mary Margaret McBride laughs] I'm thinking about adding that. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] I have women upstairs.

[ER and Mary Margaret McBride overlap]

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Add a little spice and excitement to the day.

[ER:] We have Miss Thompson upstairs.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Oh I know, and you have women here but I’ve noticed a man or two.

[ER:] Oh yes.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] And I thought that was a nice idea. But, the—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well actually uh we have one young man, that eh--you just mentioned Henry Morgenthau Jr., we have young Henry Morgenthau the Third here.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] He was the one who told me about his father.


[Mary Margaret McBride:] And then what he said. Well, I have this reporter, and suppose that you hadn't written the book. Then I-I send her to see the person, and to ask questions and try to get an angle, but I prefer book guests because then you-you have it right there, and I like people who write their lives, and I like explorers who have written about their experiences, don't you?

[ER:] Oh yes, I love explorers, and I love people who really um tell about--what they think about other people, and what they think about themselves, and-and um and one great trouble is I think uh that people
are not always um quite as revealing as they will be if you dig. And you dig, you really get out of people the best that's in them, don't you?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well, I don't know. I-I know that I've made it a kind of a life work. You know, I was a reporter before I was on the radio, I did newspaper reporting and then wrote for magazines, and it's all pretty much the same thing--the most fascinating job in the world. The thing I love though, Mrs. Roosevelt, and I've had it with you so much, is when something utterly unexpected--something I didn't plan for and never dreamed was there--when something I've said to you reminds you of something that you didn't know you were going to speak about either. And I have that feeling that everybody is coming alive right on the air. That's the nicest thing of all.

[Elliot Roosevelt:] Mhm.

[ER:] Well, that is a nice feeling. I think that's a very nice feeling, when something--when you suddenly discover in someone something you didn't really know was there, and then they're willing to share it. That's a wonderful feeling. But I don't believe you could be as good as you are, and have as good an organization, because to have a good organization, you yourself must be not only a good organizer and able to delegate work to other people, but you must inspire the same kind of interest that you have yourself.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well, people have said that my--that the people who work with me are-are too devoted to the program. That they live it the way I do. You know, it's twenty-four hours a day with me. I'm working till one and two and three in the morning on it just because I love it. I'm not complaining because it's what I want to do. I'd rather do it than anything else.

[ER:] Well, I think-I think that's the only way that one does something, really very, very well. It's when one does love it and has a great uh sense of responsibility about it, but at the same time, a real joy in doing it. And you give me that feeling always and I love to-to have a chance to talk with you. We have to um stop for a fe-in a-in just a few seconds. But I wanted to tell you that when we come back in a minute-ute, I um want to ask you a little bit about what's happening today, as far as you see it, to the women in the world. It-it--that's one of the things of interest. Now we must stop for a second. (22:37)

(Break 22:38-22:54)

[ER:] Now Mary Margaret, I-I know that you must get a great many letters from women just the way I do and they--today it seems to me women are worried, like everybody else in the world, and I wonder um what you are finding is the chief preoccupation among the women who write to you.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] I think it's peace, of course. It-It's-they're-they're all afraid and worried. I had a letter the other day I-I'd like to tell you about. It was from a woman in Long Island [papers rustle], who wrote the most intelligent letter, she said-she said, "I know what's going to happen. Right away they're going to say: 'The women must organize, the women must do something about this.'" And she went on to say how everybody she met was eaten up with fear, with anxiety, with a sort of vague terror of what was going on in the world. And she said: "The thing I want to ask you--you meet a lot of people, and they ought to be people who would know what women should do--I want to know what should we do! Because all people say is women must do something, they must organize, they must get together, women could put this over, now nobody ever says how we're to do it. Or who's to lead us. And I want to know." And then she threw out at the end of her letter, a rather controversial point, she said "Do you think," she was thinking of Great-uh England you know in the Second World War said, "do you think it would help any if women were drafted to certain jobs? I-If we were just specifically told, this is what you must do. And you're a woman with two babies, and so you have this little job to do outside your home. Or there's a
woman who has great leisure and she's put over here somewhere with a bigger job to do. Do you think"--she didn't say she was in favor of it, she just said "Do you think that would help," and I'm delighted to throw this at you, Mrs. Roosevelt. [Mary Margaret McBride laughs]

[ER:] Well, I get uh-I get not only that, I've had some uh suggesting something similar. And a long while ago, you know, I said that if we were going to have the draft um for boys--I mean universal military training by that, which would be not only in time of war, but in time of peace. That I hoped it would not be only a military thing. That I hoped um naturally, that they would have their military training and so that we would have a citizens' army, but that they would also learn something that was of value to their citizenship in a community, and that I felt every girl should have perhaps not the same amount of service, or the same kind of service--because I know how many mothers would feel terribly if their daughters left home, and that sort of thing. But that I thought there must be a way in which, in a democracy, you might be able in-in similar ways to teach girls that they had a responsibility as well as the men, and to give each one of them some knowledge, some skill, which in time of need they would know they could use. You see, your woman wouldn't be asking that question--"What can we do"--if, when she finished high school, just as when her brother finished high school, she learned to do something in her community, which in time of need she could be called upon to do again. It might be um--I don't know, it might be helping in some government office, or it might be as a volunteer in some of the various charitable things. But she would've learned a skill. And uh when she was finished she'd have a certificate that said what she was able to do, and perhaps she'd have to come back now and then to take a short refresher course to keep her up to date. But then she would always have something, and she would be on a list and listed for that ability. And there would be no question, when the need arose, that list would be there and she'd know that she was liable to be needed. That's what she would do. (27:26)

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well Mrs. Roosevelt, of course you saw Doris Fleeson's article in the-in um McCall's magazine--that's your magazine--she says that you're the most powerful woman in the world, and that you--if you think a thing is good, that you're not afraid to speak up to anybody. Even the president. So maybe we ought to delegate you. [Mary Margaret McBride and ER overlap] I-I've thought of you as a Joan of Arc--I have!

[ER:] I've-I've talked about that for a long while, I know that it has to be uh adjusted to um what's possible to do um with families and that sort of thing.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] That's right, and this woman meant that, and I don't think that she meant uh military drafting. I think she meant drafting for duty. But you know--[Elliott interrupts]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words what we should do is to change the act from the uh word "universal military training" to "universal service." [ER: Yes.] And then make all people have a part in the program--overall program. If it's a partial mobilization, the younger generation is trained to serve in whatever capacity they're capable of serving.

[ER:] Now, I remember very well um being quite interested to find that your daughter, Elliott, when there was--wasn't there a flood down in Texas? [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] I remember saying to her after all--she couldn't have been more than fourteen--um, "That must have been a dreadful time." And she said, "Oh it was, but it was very interesting, Grandmère, I helped feed people." [Mary Margaret McBride: Mhm]. Uh and I really that think that the knowledge that you know how to do something takes away much of your fear.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Yes, and you're so busy.
[ER:] And you're so busy. And then I also think that something which everyone in a democracy should learn is essential for this time, and I wonder if you'll agree with me. I think we talk so much about communism and being against it, but we don't talk so much about being for democracy and how are we living it, and what do we believe in, and are we seeing that is carried out in our communities wherever we live. Is it a daily preoccupation, because after all you never win against an idea except with another idea. [ER and Mary Margaret McBride overlap] What do you think Mary Margaret?

[Mary Margaret McBride:] A bigger, better, stronger one. Well, I think that's what women are getting to think too. That-that-that they've got to know what democracy is and they've got to live it. Right there--well it's the same old story, if every one of 'em did it, that'd be the answer wouldn't it?

[ER:] Well, that would be the answer. And I've had quite a number of letters from women asking me if I didn't think war could be stopped by women, and if they simply ban--the mothers of the world got together and said they would have no more war. And my answer to that obviously is that unfortunately at the moment, it would be very hard for the mothers of the United States, for instance, to reach the mothers of women behind the Iron Curtain and find out whether they were willing to band together with the mothers of the United States against war. And that it seemed to me, until the time came when communication was open the world over, that our preoccupation was what, by example, we could get across. And weren't we really doing more uh not in just saying "Sure I'm against communism, of course, so are you," but it doesn't do us much good just to say that, we better say what we are for when we live in a democracy and make it a living thing.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Have I time to tell you about one wonderful example of that? [ER: Yes.] Out in New Jersey. A woman told me about an organization they had there, a kind of an anti-bigot organization, just anti-prejudice. Whenever they heard anybody say a prejudiced thing, they-they didn't just come at 'em and practically knock 'em down, but they did say, well now, let me--you know they said some mild thing that was an argument, but it didn't seem like an argument, it was just gentle persuasion, and they were doing a good job on that. I call that living democracy, don't you?

[ER:] That's living democracy! And I don't know--did you ever know Mrs. Tilly from Atlanta Georgia [Mary Margaret McBride: Yes, yes]. Well now Mrs. Tilly is my living example of of a very courageous person, but not an antagonistic person, not at all.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] She's not bitter.

[ER:] She's not only not bitter, but do you remember what she looks like? She looks like a little old lady with pink roses in her bonnet!

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well, Lillian Smith is just another one [ER: Why, Lillian Smith! Yes!] who looks like a--looks like a gentlewoman – [Elliott Roosevelt overlaps with Mary Margaret McBride]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, I'd like to ask uh Mary Margaret a question, if I might, as to what she feels that radio and television can do today to further uh the consciousness on the part of our people, in this country, of the necessity of living democracy, and making it a living example for the rest of the world as a means of combating the ideology of communism.

[Mary Margaret McBride:] Well I suppose that i-that it's just what we're doing now. Discussing it, trying to get a lucid idea of what we ought to do.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well don't you feel that uh quite a bit could be worked into the so-called "soap operas" and the other forms of entertainment as well? Not as uh the waving of the flag so much, but in the actual daily living of stories that are told of people, uh it could be worked in very easily.
Well, I think it probably would be, but you're out of my depth there. I just have one of those interview programs. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] I'm not very good at making suggestions to other people, but I think anything that makes it all clearer is important to do.

Well er, Mary Margaret, in closing: definitely, what would you tell a woman today to go ahead and do?

H- herself?

Yes.

Well, we tried–Fannie Hurst came on my program one time, and we tried to get women to organize their own communities with the idea of heading it up with a central organization, and I still think if you could get women to do it. But they don’t--they--again, they need a leader. Every woman thinks that she isn't big enough or important enough, if we could just instill a kind of courage and a feeling in each one, you know, that she's big enough--[ER interrupts]

She is the most important person. And she is the individual is person to stop things. Isn't that what we need to tell a woman?

If we could do that--!

If she feels that democracy is an idea, then she should start getting other people to live it with her.

Yes. [ER interrupts] I think that's --

That you would say just as I would say.

Just exactly. I think we're in agreement.

Thank you a thousand times for being with me today, I've loved seeing you again [laughs].

Well, it's been very wonderful for me, and you're very kind to me Mrs. Roosevelt.