

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 7, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a question about whether or not ER would accept the nomination for president. In the interview segment, ER discusses national economic issues with columnist Sylvia Porter.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Sylvia Porter

[ER:] Would you s-give me the question again, Elliott?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, Mummy, I-I'd be very glad to. Uh this one is from Mrs. Leatrice Isaacson of Brooklyn, New York, and she asked, "Would you and your son Elliott discuss one day on your program whether or not you would accept a nomination to become president?" [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] It seems to me I've answered that question a number of times.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well you've an--as a matter of fact you've answered--that that you've probably been asked that more times by newspaper reporters than anything else that's ever been asked of you and also by feature writers and so forth. But this is the first time that you've been asked on your radio program, so now maybe I'll get you to answer it once and for all. And anytime they ask you, you can just say well, I've answered it on the radio and I've made a record of it, and I'm going to stick by the record and if you want to listen to it I'll be very glad to have it played for you.(1:16)

[ER:] [ER laughs] Now that might be a good idea to have the record played. Well, the answer is very simple, no, I wouldn't consider the nomination for any office of um eh for which I had to make a campaign and uh run for office [Elliott Roosevelt: Why?] and then serve uh in some legislative body or in some um position to which I'd been elected. [Elliott Roosevelt: Why?] Why? because I'm too old to begin with, but even if I were not too old um I would feel very strongly that an office like the presidency--uh if I were a young, young woman I might very easily consider running for uh offices which I considered myself qualified to fill, if I didn't have any responsibilities that made it um difficult to take office. For instance If I were young and unmarried, I would run for the state legislature if I had the means to do so. Oh, um I would run for Congress and after I had um a certain amount of experience I would be very glad to accept some other office that seemed to me within the um scope of my experience, but not at my age, and [Elliott Roosevelt: Well now, Mummy, may I interrupt?] for president. Now wait a minute, [Elliott Roosevelt: All right.] for president it seems to me foolish for any woman to even think of running for president until a great many more women are in office throughout the country and until we cease thinking of--we're voting for a woman for this or that or the other place, we're simply voting for a person who is qualified to fill a position, and until that happens in a vast number of positions, no woman could possibly run for president and hold her following. And the president who doesn't hold his following is of very little use to the country.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now may I go all the way back to your first argument? And that was: "I would not run for the presidency or any other elective office because I'm too old." Now what is the difference between an elective office and an appointive office when it comes to your capability to occupy that position because of age?

[ER:] Well, an appointive office usually is an office which you are chosen for because of special qualifications and there is usually a time limit that you can see um and you can gauge in an appointive office pretty well what is going to be required of you and whether you have the qualifications to take that particular thing for the time that you are apt to be asked to take it. Um an elective office is quite different; you may be elected for one term, you will be very little use as a rule in your first term, you must be prepared to at least cover two or three terms before you are really very valuable. Uh that for an old woman is silly I think.(4:58)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, ah I'd just like to ask, ah you know I'd like to have a little clarification on this, because you know you're putting yourself way out on a limb. Now Miss Mary Norton ah is approximately your same age isn't she?

[ER:] I think Mary Norton is perhaps a little bit older, though I wouldn't say that of any woman.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] All right, well you will admit that Miss Mary Norton as a member of Congress was a very capable member of Congress, was she not?

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt Overlap Briefly]

[ER:] Certainly, she began a good many years ago.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] She began a good many years ago and she's been occupying that position for a great many years; she only retired just before ah this last election, she declined to run again. Uh she's still a little bit younger than some of the other representatives on the male side who still are running.

[ER:] I think she showed her good sense, however.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes but has it got anything to do with a lady as to whether she's qualified to run for office because of her age, because there are many men that run many years [Overlap begins] after they made.

[ER:] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] There are many men that I think, in--today in Congress that would be very well if they read the finger on the wall and retired.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right so it isn't just a question of age, it's the ability of the person to occupy the job, [overlap begins here] regardless of sex too.

[ER:] Well it's the ability of the person to recognize when the time comes when you shouldn't occupy that kind of a job.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] So you will recognize, number one that if somebody were to select you for a job that you felt with your age that you were capable of doing whether it was elective or appointive. That—

[ER:] No, I don't think I at my age would run for an elective office. I'm not-I'm not properly qualified to run for an office that would require political um manipulation really and decisions and that would require um really entering the political field. I'm not interested and I'm I ah I wouldn't care to do it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah yes, but that has nothing to do with your age. (7:27)

[ER:] Yes it has, at my age, [Elliott Roosevelt: Not in the slightest.] if I were young I would do it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Not in the slightest, Mother.

[ER:] Oh yes it has, if I were young I'd feel it was an obligation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You know perfectly well.

[ER:] But at my age I don't feel any obligation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes you do, you have a greater obligation than anybody I ever knew, a greater sense of obligation than anybody I've ever known.

[ER:] Not to do things which I really don't think eh I'm qualified to do.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well Mother, let's just put it this way. You have a son who is a member of Congress, he ran for Congress because he felt he could do a job. You accepted an appointment as a member of the General Assembly of the United Nations representing the United States government from President Truman and you were ratified for that position by the United States Senate. Uh you in your job work ten times the hours that Franklin Jr. works as a congressman.

[ER:] Oh no I don't think so, and first place my job in in um the United Nations General Assembly is over in three months. I don't think that I could uh or would—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But you accepted another job along with it that takes a lot more than three months.

[ER:] Well no it doesn't it just takes once—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's chairman of the Human Rights Commission

[ER:] Yes, but it only takes once a year, as another session of five or six or eight weeks whatever it may be, but they don't come together they come quite far apart. I don't believe that I could work consecutively um at the rate that I work now during the General Assembly for um the whole year round, but I can do it for three months.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh could I ask you a personal question? Do you think you that work harder at your job than say um well say, one of our elder statesmen like Senator [Kenneth Douglas] McKellar?

[ER:] I can't tell because I don't know how hard they work.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well uh maybe the audience can judge the difference [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] but I would say that uh definitely that you put in more hours of work at a job that is an appointive one then uh a lot of elected officials do.

[ER:] No, not just at that job, the thing--the-the fact that I do certain jobs outside that of my own jobs and that during the General Assembly or during the Human Rights Commission those personal uh jobs which usually fill my day or as much of it as I think should be filled for steady consumption, have to be done at night or in snatches in the daytime, I'm--that makes one extra busy at these special times, but um-um that's not um being not-saying that to be a delegate to the Assembly a um takes too much time, it doesn't as a job.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right well, I think to sum it up though, if you really want to be completely honest, you ah uh must admit that you use the excuse of age to duck this question whereas your true reason is that you wouldn't be president if they offered it to you on a silver platter.

[ER:] That's quite true. [Elliott Roosevelt Laughs]

(Break 11:00-11:24)

[ER:] With me this afternoon is Miss Sylvia Porter, the only woman financial and economic columnist that I know. She writes for a paper owned by a good friend of mine who used to be one of our neighbors at Hyde Park, Mrs. Dorothy Schiff. Miss Porter's column makes clear to me many of the complex problems of finance and economy which I find at times hard to comprehend, as she presents her facts in an understandable and clear way. Here is Miss Sylvia Porter.

[Sylvia Porter:] Thank you Mrs. Roosevelt, it is indeed an honor and a privilege to be at the table with you.

[ER:] Thank you very much. There are a great many things I'd like to know about that I don't really understand, and I'm sure you can explain them. Things that are of interest to everyone, answers to questions that come up in everyone's mind, for instance: why does it seem that government control is so ineffectual in the matter of controlling the spiral costs of food and the general cost of living? Now that affects us all.

[Sylvia Porter:] It certainly does and you know, Mrs. Roosevelt, I think one of the reasons is that so far we really, as of now, haven't tried to control the spiral, we're just beginning to put in the controls that I for one, bitter and cruel as they are, think were absolutely essential, the housing controls, the controls on installment credit, the increase in taxes, that's just happening now. And we have shown until this moment singularly little courage in tackling what on the home front is as great an enemy as the threat of world domination is on the international front.

[ER:] Well do you think that's lack of courage in the government or lack of courage in the people? Do you think the people have been afraid or the government is not really confident enough that the people will stand for it?

[Sylvia Porter:] I think it's the second. It's the government that has been afraid. All during this ah latest crisis I have had such a strong feeling that the people are away-way ahead of the Congress and are much more ready to take the sacrifices which might be demanded of them to maintain a stable economy just as they have been ready to take the sacrifices demanded to maintain a free nation, and it's been the fault of the-of the timid politician so afraid of doing something which might lose a vote, that in the end could possibly lose him a country.

[ER:] Of course I'm in entire agreement with you, but I wonder if we could go one step further. I've been wondering whether we hadn't almost reached the point where we needed controls of prices and rationing again on certain essential commodities and possibly that would mean um some kind of control of wages, you couldn't control wages unless you controlled the other things. And that-that takes more courage because I remember how everybody hated it before, during the war.

[Sylvia Porter:] I don't think anyone likes controls like that anymore than anyone has liked what has happened to us since June or perhaps you could put it since 1946. Uh there is nothing funny about what is going on in the Far East today, nor has there been anything funny with what's been going on in Europe. Uh price and wage control are mean, cruel, nasty devices to postpone an evil. They are not getting at the basis of an inflationary danger, they get at the surface of it, yet they are uh necessary when you have a major economic threat. It is quite possible I think that unless the higher taxes and the other controls, which are being attempted now, are much more successful than many people fear, we will come to price and wage control again.

[EF:] And rationing that means, doesn't it?

[Sylvia Porter:] We would come with that-to that too.

[ER:] Well, I wonder how we're going to feel the effects of our tremendous re-militarization program. (15:45)

[Sylvia Porter:] Well that's just it. That's the whole thing that that uh uh be--makes us talk about such things which we had hoped we had completely put into our memories of a day that we didn't want ever to see again. But the thing is that right now we are not feeling the effects of that re-militarization program at all, there is such a tremendous lag between the placing of an order for a tank and the actual payment and delivery of that tank. And the way at least I-I've been told and the way I feel about it, it will be at least the spring before that program has its impact on our economy and, therefore, the real dangers begin to ah make themselves felt in 1951.

[ER:] Well um th-the um when you put in the order for the tank there must, at once, be a requisition of materials and that must affect um the economy more quickly than the actual payment for the tank. You must begin to feel the shortage of materials sooner, don't you?

[Sylvia Porter:] Yes, but you don't feel the real impact of it Mrs. Roosevelt. Now uh we know that there are going to be a tremendous amount of the uh uh steel and uh zinc and copper and lumber going into the manufacture of essential military supplies. As of yet a large percentage of that has not been requisitioned it is an order in a, ah-on a blueprint in Washington. It has not yet gotten to the plant which in turn will requisition the materials and even equally as important, requisition the manpower. And you know one of the points that I've always felt that people who have been complaining so bitterly about the controls attempted so far. One of the points they're not seeing is this, this is a planned recession in those industries being controlled. Planned not because anyone would want to destroy or to hurt an industry, but because the materials and the manpower being used in that industry are believed essential in a war essential industry and so that the materials and manpower would be forced to move. And so many of the people who are complaining don't recognize that it is a planned thing.

[ER:] Of course [ER Coughs] I think one of our difficulties is that what we are doing is to ask people to make sacrifices which they usually do very willingly when a country is actually in a war, but we are now asking them, um looking upon Korea as almost over. Um we are now asking them in order to um preserve peace in the world, to put themselves on a war footing and make the sacrifices which they would make if they felt themselves threatened by war and I think that requires more leadership and more real education uh than when a thing is forced upon people by the necessities of war actually at their doorstep so to speak. So I'm-I'm wondering how we can bring home to people that what they're paying the price for is freedom and security for their men, for their children, for their homes, in the future. And make them feel that it's worth doing that, even though it costs them what a war would cost, because at least their men are saved.

[Sylvia Porter:] Oh I think there's so much truth in that, and you know I do have though a great deal of hope that the American people this time just as so many of us in June, suddenly woke up out of whatever illusions we had left concerning ah the ah dangers in international affairs. I think the American people this time will accept that particular ah problem and challenge. I feel so strongly that they will not forget, and say just because Korea happily may be one solution that they can once again turn their backs on the responsibilities and on the-the price and the sacrifices.

[ER:] Well now I'm going to ask you a something that I'm sure is of interest to every woman, what is the latest information on what's going to happen to clothing prices? (20:19)

[Sylvia Porter:] [Sylvia Porter laugh] Oh well that's not isn--a laugh, as matter of fact. Well, Mrs. Roosevelt, once again you look behind the scenes into what has been going on in the primary market. Uh

the wool market, uh the uh uh the rayon market, the nylon and the cotton market and the primary markets long before it goes into the retail store. There have been some sensational and in many cases some rather unforgivable price increases, and as a result unless we had a very strong ceiling slapped on the prices of clothing in the very near future the prices of the things that you and I will want to wear or must buy to put on our backs will be higher.

[ER:] Well, I think we've all um faced that fact more or less, [Sylvia Porter chuckles] I think that most of us who know that you have to have uniforms and-and know human nature and the fact that uh usually people who can make money by prior knowledge or something do it, um have realized that we would come to that. But the trouble is it always comes heaviest on the poor people who can't buy too much at one time. Now I must go back for a minute to our sponsors.

(Break 21:35-21:44)

[ER:] Now Miss Porter I have a really difficult question I think. The government recently issued orders increasing the percentage of down payments on the purchasing of houses. Is this going to cut individual housing?

[Sylvia Porter:] Oh yes, Mrs. Roosevelt, that again comes back to that point about the planned recession. Uh the minimum that the cut is supposed to be--to achieve is one third. Now this year, 1950, the chances are we will reach an all-time record of about a million three-hundred thousand, one- and two- family houses. Next year that figure will probably be no more than eight hundred to eight hundred and fifty thousand houses and it may be less, and again it's that planned recession idea of cutting into what we ordinarily would want very much to encourage in order to release the essential materials and the essential manpower for our most miserable task, but an essential one. (22:45)

[ER:] I see well we might just as well know the truth and know that we've got to face up to it, so I'm glad you answered it honestly. Now I'm going to ask you a question that came to me in a letter the other day from a young woman whose husband is um I should say was in an income bracket around eight thousand dollars and they have three children and she was bemoaning the fact that the exemptions were so unfair that the bachelor uh was exempted fairly high and married people without children came next and then she felt that those who had children should be exempted to the point where what they saved on income taxes would really cover the expense of the children, but she found that she only really had about six hundred dollars more in exemption than the bachelor and she said it costs her a lot more than that for her three children and she didn't think it was fair. Now I'd like you to answer that. [Sylvia Porter laughs]

[Sylvia Porter:] Well that puts me into an entirely different category, but you know, Mrs. Roosevelt, I don't ever think the income tax exempture-exemption for children was designed to cover the cost of a child. It never, at least in my whole knowledge, has been anywhere near it. And—

[ER:] You'd think we're just were supposed to want children and p--and pay our taxes regardless. [ER and Sylvia Porter laugh]

[Sylvia Porter:] And not count them as a little income tax exemption despite the jokes made about that. Oh it's-it's so far away ah the-the actual exemptions which are, are uh given for that, and for other things and for what the cost of it is, but again you come back to this. The willingness of the American people to recognize the challenge to pay the taxes which are essential to make their country strong and to keep it so and to pay the taxes which are essential to preserve the value of the American dollar and that doesn't give any of us much exemption, and the pity of it is that it puts the squeezes so much on just perhaps the exactly the woman who wrote you that letter: whose husband's income may not be increasing at all,

whose cost of living is going way up, and with three children and the cost of milk and butter and clothing, way up.

[ER:] Well she particularly [Sylvia Porter: There she is] mentioned the cost of dentists and doctors for children between the ages of um five and fifteen, and of course we all of us know that's pretty high, but there is uh some exemption isn't there for doctors and dentists?

[Sylvia Porter:] If it amounts to I believe to more than five percent of your income, and I hope that she doesn't have that kind of dental and doctor's bill, if it gets that tough there is an exemption, uh, but uh for most of us happily the doctor's and dentist's bills do not reach that point in your income. On the other hand she has a very valid argument, but I would hate to say it and I seem to sound like such a Cassandra, I doubt very much that she'll get anywhere with it for a long, long time to come. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Well now we'll move to something which is more in the line of a financial expert. Maybe you can explain to our audience the point at which a government system ceases to be a free-enterprise capitalistic system and becomes socialistic. Now of course you know and I know that um the United Kingdom or Great Britain or whatever you choose to call it-it uh is often looked upon with grave suspicion in many places in this country because it has become a socialist country and uh sometimes I wonder if there isn't tied up with all of this a question of whether you can remain a democracy and be, in your economy, a socialist country. So I'm going to ask you the two questions, one a really financial one to start with. What about this? What is the point at which you cease to be a free enterprise capitalistic system and become socialistic?

[Sylvia Porter:] It's a difficult question, Mrs. Roosevelt, to answer in a pat way. Uh I-I would like to make a few comments and ask you if you can name that point. I think it's quite possible, first of all, for a country to have a socialistic economy in many ways and to be and remain and to be even more so a democratic nation. Uh Perhaps the um movement towards socialism in certain fields will be just the movement which will preserve the democracy and perhaps what England has done in its turning socialistic in so many ways is exactly or precisely the thing that saved it from going into an entirely different, and much, much more revolting in every conceivable sense, direction.

[ER:] Of course, I-I think there you said something that is true because I find a great many of England's um finest people who have known a great many privileges in the past are taking the present hardships better perhaps than some of the people who never had as much.

[Sylvia Porter:] Hm I am very sure that's so. I don't think you can say, that they-ey, I at least have never found a precise point when you can say this is the moment at which an economy goes from one direction to another. I know you might be able to-to uh say that it--as soon as you take over the basic forms of transportation or the basic forms of communication, but we have always had in this country certain very socialistic things. [ER laughs]The telephone company and [ER: And the post office] and the post office is a perfect example of it. And the--uh our public power experiments which have in turn led to some of the best developments in private power.

[ER:] But of course they were nearly always does as yardsticks weren't they? To improve the private uh ownership for the public.

[Sylvia Porter:] Exactly, I-I wonder if you could name a precise point at which you turn from a free enterprise economy to a socialistic one?

[ER:] I don't think I can, because I think that uh you only--if you are a free enterprise capitalistic system you only take to anything socialistic as the need actually proves itself, do you see? And I don't know that

you can say you've become more socialistic, you have accepted a reality which is evident in your financial system and um method in a certain way-ay, and I um-I don't really know that I think that is um, maybe it's socialism but it's um uh it's socialism of a kind that you can rarely prevent because you only accept it when you absolutely have to.

[Sylvia Porter:] You know it as you were talking I was thinking of some of the uh laws that went through in the mid-thirties that each time were condemned in the most vitriolic way as being not only socialism but the complete death knell of everything that the American system held dear. To name one, insurance of bank deposits. I have some precious statements in my files about what some very well-known men today said when we started to insure bank deposits, I'm sure that they themselves would wince if I ever quoted them out loud. But it was a tremendously socialistic thing. Today it is not only accepted but we've gone to the point of raising it from five thousand to ten thousand dollars, [ER laughs] take the Securities and Exchange Commission, the SEC oh how that was condemned; today its greatest defenders are the very men who shuddered at the thought of it, in the thirties. Take social security, I could go right down the line, I think it's very difficult and you say it so well when you say you take each one in stride depending upon the need.

[ER:] You take it-you take it as you have to. Now many businessmen consider that the government has exerted too many controls on private industry and that the government is stifling the free-the free enterprise system that our whole form of government and the freedom of the individual will eventually disappear. Do you consider that this may eventually become a reality?

[Sylvia Porter:] I don't, Mrs. Roosevelt. I think that my country will remain a free country for as long as the people want it to be, and I think that they always will want it to be.

[ER:] Now that is just exactly what I think, so that I [ER laughs] I couldn't be more in agreement with you. I think that um the people of this country, if they recognize their power, are going to make our economy exactly what they think they need, but they have to recognize their power. And now thank you so much for being with us tonight and I must turn the program back to Elliott.

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30(42)

First Edit: Katie Woods
Final Edit MJ Binker
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