

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 5th, 1951

Description: In the in interview segment, ER discusses censorship with Gilbert Seldes, war correspondent, playwright, and political columnist.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Gilbert Seldes

[ER:] Good afternoon, this is Eleanor Roosevelt. I'm happy to welcome you for another visit here in my living room at the Park Sheraton Hotel. As usual I have a guest that you'll be anxious to meet, and as usual, Elliott will assist me on the program. And now, here is Elliott.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Thank you, Mother. Gilbert Seldes is our guest today. Mr. Seldes is a man of many literary accomplishments: war correspondent, music critic, playwright, and political columnist. Today he's going to discuss his views of censorship. Mother also has a thing or two to say on that score. So t-today is the day we make our weekly Eleanor Roosevelt civic award. The Women's Forum of Nassau County, Long Island will be honored. Also, my mother and I plan to hold a brief discussion on the subject: "Is it right that union workers' families must suffer privation when a strike is called." But before we get underway, a brief statement from our sponsors who make this recorded program possible.

(Break 1:15 to 1:27)

[ER:] The press, books, radio, television, the theater all have their impact on public thinking today. With me today in my living room is a well-known writer and newspaper man who's had great experience in all these fields and has some very interesting views on them. I'm happy to introduce to you Mr. Gilbert Seldes.

[Gilbert Seldes:] How do you do?

[ER:] Very glad to have you here, Mr. Seldes. Now, before we start in on questions, tell us a little about yourself, a passport so to speak. What has been your main field? (2:06)

[Gilbert Seldes:] My main interest and the thing in which I've worked longest has been popular entertainment. I have a sort of uh mad passion for all types of uh American enterprise and American character, and I've found that the thing in which American character expressed itself best twenty years ago was in uh the--what I call the lively arts, meaning uh everything that is popular entertainment except radio and television which didn't exist so powerfully at the time. And uh --

[ER:] Well, you called your first book *The Seven Lively Arts*, didn't you?

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes, there is a catch in it though, Mrs. Roosevelt. I've often been trapped into saying -- in-in being asked what are the seven. I've looked into the book and sometimes I've found twelve, and sometimes only four. [ER laughs] In general, everything that uh entertains uh great masses of people and wasn't considered the great arts, I gathered- -corralled them in and said, "These I love, these seem to be very good expressions of American character, and these I will write about it." And so I did.

[ER:] And so you did, and that-that has been your main interest ever since?

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes, I-I stopped writing about them and went into work in them, I worked in three of the uh major things, in radio, television and the movies, but I've never drawn a uh comic book, and I've never written a popular song. I rather regret it, especially the popular song. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Popular song. I don't think I would regret so much not having written a comic book, even though I am told they are vastly important today.

[Gilbert Seldes:] They are uh sinisterly important, if that is such a word, but I don't-I don't mind not having written one. [ER laughs] I do-I do not --

[ER:] I'm glad to hear that. [ER laughs] But you're still just as enthusiastic about the popular arts as you were at the beginning?

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes, I think that uh in certain-certain exceptions. I actually do not think the comic strip is as uh wonderful it was in the days of *Krazy Kat*, and I think our popular songs have become awfully melancholy. I-I am not myself as pessimistic as the popular songs of today make out Americans to be. [ER laughs] But otherwise, I think the movies are-are splendid and terrific, and I hope they'll withstand the impact of their latest competitor, and I think television itself is utterly absorbing and-and fantastically interesting.

[ER:] Well now, you've written a [Gilbert Seldes: And radio.] new book and um you have uh -- it has a new approach, um *The Great Audience*. What uh what actually is the difference, what do you mean by great audience?

[Gilbert Seldes:] The difference -- well, I can explain that by uh by uh showing the difference between that *The Seven Lively Arts*. [ER: Yes.] *Seven Lively Arts* was all about pleasure. I took an enormous amount of pleasure, and I didn't realize you uh may sometimes have to pay for the pleasures you take, I think that's a well-known experience that comes later in life. I was interested in the people that-that made uh these great entertainments, and I'm happy to think that at twenty-five years ago I chose, among others, [Al] Jolson, [Irving] Berlin, and so on as the great characters. But now in this new book *The Great Audience*, I -- frankly I've experienced parenthood since that time, I've had children and seen them grown up, and I am a little bit worried by the effects of these entertainments, and that is what *The Great Audience* is about. What do all these entertainments put together, the enormous mass there is of them, actually do to people? How do they affect our lives, and how do they affect the lives of the next generation also? The great audience, uh by that I mean really all the people in all the ways in which they are interested, and it's uh, it's kind of a pun; part of that refers to Walt Whitman saying, "If we're to have great poets, we must have to have great audiences," and part of it sort of looks back at the uh mania we all have in this businesses of measuring our audiences, the big audience. I think it's more important to have an audience that's fed all the way 'round than merely to have an awful lot of people. Numbers are not im-as important as quality, although I don't despise numbers.

[ER:] No, and after all we um uh-yo-your uh big audience is numbers, isn't it, as much as quality. You may have a selective audience and uh a group of people, but you have got to appeal to uh the big everyday people who just live their lives as the great mass of us do.

[Gilbert Seldes:] Oh yes, and I am-I am very much opposed to uh sort of a little theater movement for the movies, I think a movie should be available for everybody. I-I really do not particularly care for uh radio programs that are put on, uh usually with a lot of prestige, as if they're too good for the average man. On the contrary, I'm opposed to all uh little sects and groups and high-brow movements, because I think that the mass of people really are interested or capable of being interested in practically everything.

[ER:] Perhaps you feel as I do that nothing is too good for the average man. [ER laughs]

[Gilbert Seldes:] There's a song to that effect and it's one of the more cheerful songs. I thoroughly agree.
[Gilbert Seldes laughs]

[ER:] I have a feeling, you know, that uh that things that can't be understood by um intelligent children and the average uh person are probably not really um very important to most of us, that the ability to make them simple is-is real genius.

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes, I [Gilbert Seldes laughs] I must agree. I-I lived for a long time as a sort of popularizer, and once told the editor of a magazine with a large circulation that if he would get someone to explain the Einstein theory to me, then I would undertake to explain it to his readers. [ER: Yes, that's - -] [ER laughs] But until I understood it, I felt that I-I really couldn't cite it. No one met that challenge, by the way, [ER laughs] no one's yet made me understand it sufficiently for me to think that I could explain it to someone else. [ER: For you to explain it to them!] No, I wouldn't undertake it. (7:54)

[ER:] My children always tease me because um some young man wrote a thesis once on the age you um had to be to read the different columnists, and um Mr. [Arthur] Krock and Mr. [Walter] Lippmann required two years' college education, and I only required a fifth grade education. [ER laughs]

[Gilbert Seldes:] Oh, that's wonderful! You have uh you have simplicity of style and --

[ER:] Well, they were very -- the children were having a grand time with me, they said, "Now you see, Mother, come down off your high horse; you really don't know much." [ER laughs]

[Gilbert Seldes:] Oh, on the contrary, I think it's a tribute to your simplicity of style which I've -- I may say, almost always admired. Always -- not almost always -- admired.

[ER:] Well I-I can't say that I really think that uh I have what might be called a style, but I did learn to write clearly, I think, and simply because I had so many manuscripts for the radio returned to me when I [ER laughs] first started. [Gilbert Seldes: Oh really? Oh I didn't know!] Oh, I-I redid so many manuscripts trying to say the same thing in simple words that I think it helped my column. [ER laughs]

[Gilbert Seldes:] Was -- may I ask you a question? [ER: Yes.] Was radio writing--uh did radio drive you to a greater simplicity than uh newspaper column writing?

[ER:] Well, that was the first time they started the--that I really had the manuscripts sent back to me over and over again. [Gilbert Seldes laughs] And then I realized that I was doing the same thing in my column. [Gilbert Seldes: Ah.] And then I began to-to-to try and do it in everything, you see, to make it clear to everyone. [Gilbert Seldes: So--] Myself included! [ER laughs]

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes that, of course, is one essential thing. We do have to be--we have to make things clear to ourselves before we can go on.

[ER:] Well, I think now that we'll have to uh stop for a few minutes and come back again to more discussion in a minute.

(Break 9:39 to 9:49)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Here's something that will interest every listener. The makers of delicious Golden Mix for Griddle Cakes and Waffles are generously offering a full sized package of Golden Mix at absolutely

no cost to you. Just send a card bearing your name and address to the Roosevelts, the Park Sheraton Hotel, New York City, and in return you'll receive a special card from us which you can present at your grocer's for a free box of Golden Mix. This is the last week that Golden Mix is making this wonderful offer, so write today. Address your request to the Roosevelts at the Park Sheraton Hotel, New York City. You've been listening to the Eleanor Roosevelt Program, which comes to you each day, Monday through Friday, at 12:30 and at 660 on your dial. And this program originates from Mrs. Roosevelt's living room at the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. This is Elliott Roosevelt speaking and wishing you all a very good afternoon.

(Break 11:01 to 11:10)

[ER:] And now the mail, Elliott.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right, Mother, this eh this question has rather intricate wording but I think I understand what the lady wants to find out.

[ER:] Are these all ladies?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Almost all of the letters that you get are from ladies, you know your program comes at a time of day when [ER: The men can't listen.] gentlemen are not listening to the radio. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] Uh this question is: "Do you think the American system is wrong whereby men are forced to stop work in strikes so that they have no money to take care of their families?" (11:45)

[ER:] No, I -- that is really a question of whether you believe in-in a union or don't believe in a union. Fundamentally I believe in unions. I think there can be abuses and there have been abuses, and unions have both abused their own people when the leaders were bad, and they have um uh sometimes tried for things which were not good for the general uh health of the business, and that was because their leaders were not intelligent enough. But fundamentally I believe in unions. They arose in this country after much struggle because of the abuses when there were -- when the workers had no strength to exert against the employers who had all the strength, they had the wherewithal of life in their hands and they abused that power. [Elliott Roosevelt: And don't you think --] And that's how unions arose.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And don't you think that in answering this question that you have to take into account that a strike as a rule is caused by uh maybe a lack of sufficient money being paid by the employer for that person to be able to take care of the family. That's why the strike takes place.

[ER:] Well, of course now, in many of the better organized unions, there is sufficient um uh fund available as a rule so that for a time, at least in a short strike, um the-the union can give uh the members some money for subsistence. Um it always is a hardship, and that's one of the difficulties, of course, of organizing unions, that you have to get across the idea that you are not fighting just for your own good, but you are fighting for the good of all your brother workers. And when you have a strike which is designed not perhaps even to help the people in your plant, but to help um a section of the people who don't have good wages, or don't have proper working conditions, or where you feel as you--as now that you are not getting the proper share of the profits of the business, which sometimes comes into the picture because um the-the better educated labor leader today knows what is being made by the business and naturally feels that if the cost of living goes up, his share of those profits must cover that rise in cost of living. And he must have his share. And sometimes uh we have had um uh times when people felt --uh union members felt uh that it was hard that they had to go on strike, because they themselves were not the ones who were suffering. Somebody --uh some section of their union was in trouble. Uh, and that's-that's why keeping a union together is difficult, because it presupposes a sense among the people that they are

one. That if one group suffers, everybody is going to suffer sooner or later, and therefore there must be a certain amount of unselfishness, and human nature isn't unselfish except by education.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. Well now, here's something that has always bothered me on the subject of strikes. And that is where a union takes workers out on a strike and they are out for a long period of time, and uh they suffer a great deal from the loss of wage income, and then they settle the strike, and the gains that are achieved through the settlement would take years for them to regain with those added benefits [ER: What they lost.] -- what they lost in actual income.

[ER:] Of Course the ideal is not to have strikes. But unfortunately you haven't reached the point where um employers and labor leaders um can always settle reasonably the questions that come up. There are certain um industrial leaders who have um gained -- seen the light, and they rarely have strikes, but uh that isn't universal as yet.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, uh that's rather an interesting point. Uh there are industrial leaders in this country uh that so firmly believe that uh--in the paternalistic system, and they do not believe in the union system, and uh they pay a higher wages, they manage to keep from having any strikes, they keep the unions out completely, and uh the obje-usual run of these paternalistic operations is that they pay a higher wage than they would have if there was a union.

[ER:] Yes, you ought to know something about a situation like that because you should remember Father telling us about his grandfather Delano's mines, [ER coughs] and his uncle's, who uh did not actually keep the union out. But kept such good conditions, they with s-quite considerable pride would say, "Our men don't need a union. In fact, our men drive the union organizers out of town because they feel their benefits are such that um they don't want to risk those benefits by attempting to have a union." And that was in the coal business some number of years ago. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] And if you will remember when one of uh Father's aunts divided up a certain number of shares of stock among the various nephews and nieces, among whom your father was one, he entered into a discussion -- perhaps you were too young to remember -- as to whether eh he wanted to hold stock, when fundamentally he believed in unions, and though it was always said that nothing was done by the ownership to prevent unions, they were not organized. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And uh he finally sold all that stock that was given him, because he said he did not feel that he could hold it honestly when it didn't believe in it -- eh believe in the uh type of paternalism that existed. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] Now that is really uh the same thing you do see in some businesses today. And I think you'd find that those very businesses would say they never do anything to keep the union out, but their people uh can't uh -- are afraid to risk the benefits they have, which are very great, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] by having the union come in. But the day will come, because the basis of um unionism, really, is that you want things as a right, you don't want them as gifts. Now, these very owners today, who are good owners and who run their businesses well say, "But these are the rights of our workers; we are simply sharing what is good, uh what has been so profitable for us."

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well then, do you feel that uh where unions organize a business, that they have a right to representation on the board and-and in the management of the company?

[ER:] I think that is what should happen in the future, if we are to have a peaceful industrial economy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh in other words, then, you feel that the solution to the continuation of the profit motive system in this country is to have labor representation on the boards of directors of our big corporations.

[ER:] I do, and I feel very-I-I feel that uh it's what should happen if we are not um to endanger our system. Because uh the communists would like to say, and you'll find our communist labor leaders saying

that there can never be understanding between the two extremes, the employer and the man who works. But I believe there can be, just as I believe we can do away with war by greater understanding and cooperation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. Well, uh just one more question before we get off of this subject: I'd like to ask you whether, in your opinion, uh the union w-that has the communist agitator uh type of mentality at the head, uh whether those unions have really got a-a right to exist in the American system because they try to agitate uh against the uh the success of the company?

[ER:] But that's the-that's the trouble uh in the labor movement today, that uh they must drive out the communist uh agitator, and the communist leader. And um it's not easy to do. But that's the struggle that's going on today, and gradually, little by little, it's being accomplished.

(Break 22:01 to 22:10)

[Returns to second part of interview with Gilbert Seldes]

[ER:] Now I want to ask you a question that I think great many of us have discussed very often. Do you think the government, federal or otherwise, should have more control over any form of popular entertainment? (22:25)

[Gilbert Seldes:] No, and no, and no again, and then I'm a little frightened. I was brought up in what used to be called the liberal tradition. And that tradition, I think, means: "Don't do anything by law if you can get it done any other way. Avoid uh the law at the last possible extreme." It seems to me that the American people would rebel against the idea of their government suggesting to them: "This is the kind of television show, or radio program, or m-m-motion picture, or anything else that you ought to have." I think that uh we don't live in that kind of communion with our government sufficiently to make it possible for the government really to represent our tastes. Now, I think that uh-certain regulations are required as they are uh by the FCC over broadcasting, by local regulations representing what people feel in any community about the movies, although I'm violently opposed the exercise of censorship. But I think that a uh a centralized control over any of our entertainments is-is a deadly thing. And one reason that I wrote my book was to suggest to the managers of all these entertainments to amend their ways if their ways are wrong -- I think they are in certain aspects -- let them mend their ways before the outcry gets great. Now the outcry is, I think, greatest in connection with comic books. And here in New York State, there was a law passed but not signed uh which practically put the state of New York into the business of censoring comic books. What frightens me is that the protest of individuals, and even of groups, sometimes is so ineffective that people rush to a law. And uh to infringe on the uh the freedom of the press, even in the matter of printing comic books, seems to me a fatal thing to happen in this country. It would be important, I think. So my hope still is that people will uh what was I say -- self-reform themselves, and will avoid the more uh vigorous and angry protests that are bound to come when uh people's feelings outrage, as certain uh miscalled comic uh horror and uh sadistic books have certainly outraged a great many people. Here in this state, and all through the country, there have been attempts to find some way to operate the law, but the only- the only power they use legally apparently is a sort of police power.

[ER:] Of course I don't approve of censorship uh either that is enforced by the law. I think that we should be able to have a choice. I mean we-we -- and we should be capable of making a choice [Gilbert Seldes: Ah, yes.] That should be what education is-is supposed to do for us.

[Gilbert Seldes:] I think that our mass media, which is the big fancy name for broadcasting, movies and so on, ought to work in a little bit more closely with that. I think that as, for instance, uh NBC has announced

that it's going to withdraw a certain number of very-very good broadcasting hours on television and devote them to cultural and educational purposes. [ER: Oh dear.] And uh they're going to be uh hours which apparently will be put into the-in the course of the regular uh program. Uh there we'll have a choice. But I think that sometimes uh the mass media don't cooperate enough with our educational system. (25:50)

[ER:] Well now, as you know [ER clears her throat] there has been a request for taking certain um channels and turning them over to uh edu-the educational field for uh-uh the purposes of education, and I suppose education means culture. Uh I happen -- [Gilbert Seldes: Not always.] Not-not alway -- [laughs] I happen uh to wonder whether the real way isn't to insist that the people whose business entertainment uh and radio uh is shall do a better job, but if it isn't better, to have it all in one.

[Gilbert Seldes:] Well I-I'm uh I'm on your side. I uh still feel something uh that's wrong if you separate the sheep and the goats, and I don't know who would be the sheep and the goats in this matter. But if you say -- if you're one kind of person, uh we have a special corral for you to go into, and you can see all the particular kind of things you want. I like to see a uh magazine illustration, and a uh-uh famous work of art in the Renaissance, and a famous modern work more or less along the uh windows of Fifty-Seventh Street as I pass by and feel that I can choose my own. I do not like the idea that all of one kind of entertainment will be put in one place. And I think that that idea would never have occurred if there'd been a-a little more attention paid from time to time to other types of programs than just the very most popular. I think that the shading off ought to be greater so that more kinds of-of entertainments are supplied all the time to people.

[ER:] Well now, I understand that you say that, in part, our mass entertainments are anti-democratic. Do you think they're not giving the people what they want, or in what way are they anti-democratic?

[Gilbert Seldes:] I think they're giving the people what they want to a great extent. I think that uh the reason people want certain things is because they've been given to them, they got in the habit of wanting them. I think that not enough of the wants of people -- of the average person I mean -- not enough of his interests are satisfied, not enough curiosities are aroused, and that uh in the case of the movies you have -- it's really a minority art, minority entertainment, because it only serves at most about twenty, twenty-five million or thirty million people out of a hundred fifty million. I take figures only from vice presidents in charge of studios when I quote movie figures. [ER laughs] But they know actually that the average A-picture is only seen by fifteen million people, and they're appalled now although they've had the figures for five years. They want to find out how to bring in the remaining hundred million. In that sense that's, I think, anti-democratic; it doesn't serve enough people. I think radio's a much broader base and could serve more of the interests of more people. And uh the -- I think the reason I call it anti-democratic is that I think that in a democratic country, it's not only the idea of one man one vote, the idea that every man has the chance to develop fully, including his mind. And I think that sometimes our uh mass entertainments tend to stupefy our minds a little bit instead of alerting them. I don't think all of our minds are sufficiently alerted enough of the time.

[ER:] I think I agree with you. Now, do you think a sound democratic entertainment industry can be successful within the bounds of our capitalistic system? (29:23)

[Gilbert Seldes:] Well, Mrs. Roosevelt, I think it's probably only within a capitalistic system that you can get thoroughly democratic uh entertainment system. I think that you have to allow a great many people to make their living by the thing they believe in, which is the kind of entertainment they give. That is one side of uh democracy which works entirely in the capitalist system. Actually, I think what I am proposing is that people shall make even more money. And of course pay more taxes, which is normal. But if the movies can draw back, for instance, all the people that stopped going to the movies [ER: They'll make

more money. Quite evidently!] [ER laughs] They'd make a hundred fifty more million dollars a year net after taxes if everybody that stopped going to the movies will go only once a month. Vice president's figures, I assure you.

[ER:] [ER laughs] That is an astounding figure!

[Gilbert Seldes:] [Gilbert Seldes laughs] Well, it's-it's uh I-I believe it to be accurate. And another way I think -- and I use the word anti-democratic, and I know it's difficult, but I have a feeling that we need to be extremely uh independent of mind and extremely thoughtful these days, and I think that any kind of entertainment that lulls us into false psychological security, let's say, is extremely dangerous for us. I don't think this is a nice situation in the world, Mrs. Roosevelt, I think it's a very difficult one, and I don't know that we are uh being held up to the level that it requires.

[ER:] Now um, I started to talk about the theater, and I think you have a special interest in the theater uh because the other night I went to performance which ANTA [American National Theater and Academy] has put on with Judith Anderson. I understand your daughter is playing Electra in that.

[Gilbert Seldes:] That was she whom you saw, Mrs. Roosevelt, and you've touched upon the topic perhaps on which I would like to talk about the longest and certainly with the deepest emotion.

[ER:] Well, I think she gave a wonderful performance [Gilbert Seldes: Oh, I'm very glad you did, Mrs --] And I enjoyed the evening. I was asked afterwards whether I thought it was Broadway-- uh-uh it would be possible on Broadway. And I'm not a sufficient judge, but I certainly spent one of the most pleasantest evenings, uh at least -- not pleasant, but most stirring evenings.

[Gilbert Seldes:] Yes, it's very emotional, and uh and it was doubly emotional for me as I admire both Miss Anderson and my daughter enormously.

[ER:] Well, of course I know and-and have a great affection for Miss Anderson from-uh for a long time, and do think she's one of our great actresses, [Gilbert Seldes: Oh, I do too.] great tragic actresses. Well now, I'm very much afraid our time is drawing to a close and there is so much I want to ask you that um I don't know what I should give you as a last question. I think what I'll ask you is: What is the chief thing people ought to do to make their wants felt by the creators of entertainment?

[Gilbert Seldes:] I think they ought to get back to the ancient American habit of protest. Of saying what they don't--uh saying what they like and what they don't like. About for the last fifteen years or so, we've been euchred into an odd position that anybody who protests about anything is considered suspect of something. Uh so that you cannot say you dislike one type of food, I won't mention even a single comestible. You can't say you don't like this type of book, yo--actually, you can't review a book unfavorably without someone questioning your politics, your morals, and so forth. So the habit of protest has-has died uh very much in America. Remember a-a person who felt that way, he was a mayor across uh the river, once said that every time he heard the word civil liberties, he wanted to reach for a gun. Uh we who still believe in liberty ought to act on it. And I think that people are afraid to-to get into little groups and protest. They're afraid that they'll be taken for Helen Hokinson's women, uh morally good uh well-intentioned up-lifters, so they avoid it. Uh you see very few uh protests. Once in a while, uh one works and is very effective.

[ER:] Well, that's a very good answer. Now I want to thank you so much for being with me today, and goodbye.

[Gilbert Seldes:] Thank you so much.

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