Eleanor Roosevelt's Legacy: Human Rights

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On Dec. 10, 1948, at 3 A.M., the United Nations General Assembly, meeting in Paris, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stands to this day as the most widely recognized statement of the rights to which every person on our planet is entitled.

Then something happened that never happened in the United Nations before or since. The delegates rose to give a standing ovation to a single delegate, a shy, elderly lady with a rather formal demeanor but a very warm smile. Her name, of course, was Eleanor Roosevelt.

The Universal Declaration was not a binding treaty, only a "standard of achievement" to which nations should aspire. But it has now been published in the native languages of all countries, serving as a rallying point for such diverse victims of oppression as Lech Walesa in Poland and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. It is used as a yardstick to measure governmental performance both by United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations. It has influenced the constitutions and legislation of many states and is the main source of inspiration for more than 20 legally-binding human rights treaties and for human rights institutions in Europe and Latin America.

In January of 1947, when the United Nations Commission on Human Rights was established, Mrs. Roosevelt, who had been appointed a United Nations delegate by President Harry S. Truman a year before, was promptly elected chairman.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Roosevelt soon found herself embroiled in bitter confrontations with the Russians. They meant something quite different by the terms "freedom" and "democracy." They wanted a provision after each article saying it was up to the state to determine whether a specific right was being observed. And they pushed for the inclusion of economic and social rights - rights to employment, education, health care - which they said were no less important than political rights. After some discussion, Mrs. Roosevelt persuaded the State Department to accept the inclusion of economic rights. Had not President Roosevelt, after all, framed the postwar goal of "freedom from want" - "everywhere in the world"? Despite this move to meet them part way, the Russians were stonewalling. They had decided that the Universal Declaration would not be to their liking. They made vitriolic harangues on racial discrimination and unemployment in the United States.

When a Russian delegate turned to the theme of the plight of black Americans, Mrs. Roosevelt proposed that the Russians could send a team to observe racial problems in the United States if the United States could do the same in the Soviet Union. "The Russians seem to have met their match in Mrs. Roosevelt," The New York Times observed.

Determined to press the Declaration to completion, Mrs. Roosevelt drove her colleagues mercilessly. There were fourteen, sixteen hour days and some delegates may have secretly whispered the prayer ascribed to President Roosevelt: "O Lord, make Eleanor tired!" A delegate from Panama begged Mrs. Roosevelt to remember that United Nations delegates have human rights, too.
By the summer of 1948, the Universal Declaration had finally taken shape. Framed as Mrs. Roosevelt wanted, in simple and eloquent prose, it drew heavily on the American Bill of Rights, the British Magna Carta and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. It consisted of a preamble and 30 articles setting forth fundamental rights and freedoms.

Article 1 set the basic philosophy of the Declaration: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Article 2 set out the principle of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of human rights. Articles 3 through 21 laid down political and civil rights, including the right to life, liberty and property; freedom from torture or degrading treatment or punishment; freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile; the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal; freedom of thought and religion; freedom of expression; the right to peaceful assembly and association.

Articles 22 through 27 established economic, social and cultural rights. These included the right to work; the right to social security; the right to equal pay for equal work; the right to rest and leisure; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to education; and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community.

When the General Assembly convened in Paris in the fall of 1948, the Soviets were blockading Berlin. Speaking in French at the Sorbonne, Mrs. Roosevelt said that the Russians' failure to respect human rights was now a major obstacle to world peace. When the Declaration was finally adopted, Ambassador Charles Malik of Lebanon declared: "I do not see how without her presence we could have accomplished what we actually did accomplish."

Although Mrs. Roosevelt was proud of her role in shaping the Universal Declaration, she was always a realist. She knew its words were not self-enforcing. The real challenge, she liked to tell United Nations delegates in later years, was one of "actually living and working in our countries for freedom and justice for each human being."

That is a challenge she readily accepted, and her example is one of that inspires us today.

After the reading:

1. List 5 rights that were stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. Which right do you think is the most important? Why?

3. What challenge(s) did Eleanor Roosevelt believe the world faced next? Have we succeeded?