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“A More Perfect Union – Year “
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Paper 3

“No Ordinary Time”

In *No Ordinary Time*, Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a detailed account of the relationship between Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt set against two great events: the New Deal and World War II. According to Goodwin, these two great events ushered in modern America. Goodwin highlighted America’s transformation by examining the players, who shaped not only the Roosevelt administration but the entire nation. During the Roosevelt era, the White House served home to myriad of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt’s confidants and advisors. There was the trustworthy Harry Hopkins and his young daughter. Franklin’s secretary, Missy LeHand, also lived in the White House and was madly in the love the president. Then, there was the former journalist, Lorena Hickok, who was madly in love with Eleanor. However, the two most central characters living in the White House were the president and first lady: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Goodwin made their relationship central to understanding not only the Roosevelt White House but also the World War II era. And in so doing, Goodwin depicted how both the New Deal and World War II modernized and transformed America into a world superpower.

Throughout the novel, Goodwin shifted between analysis of historical events and biographical anecdotes of the lives the historical characters. Goodwin left a lasting impression of what the war looked like from the perspectives of its most important participants. Goodwin also highlighted the two events that forever changed Franklin

were his overcoming polio that left him handicapped and the effect his affair with Lucy Mercer had on his relationship with Eleanor. Mercer, who had been Eleanor's social secretary, was young and beautiful. Mercer claimed that the attraction between Franklin and her was immediate. However, the affair ended in 1918 after Eleanor found a packet of Lucy's lover letters. Still, Goodwin doubted that there was a physical relationship – there is simply not enough evidence to confirm. The affair devastated Eleanor. She offered Franklin a divorce. He declined for fear of offending his authoritarian mother.

The affair, moreover, changed the marriage. Marital relations ended. Separate bedrooms ensued. The Roosevelt house divided. Their marriage turned into a working relationship with Eleanor “free to seek new avenues of fulfillment” (20). Eleanor turned into a great social crusader advocating on the behalf of the downtrodden. Franklin encouraged her to be his “eyes and ears” (27). Unable to travel, he taught her how to inspect state institutions when he was governor of New York. This working relationship was advantageous for both. Franklin depended on the information she brought him, while Eleanor felt a sense of purpose. As Eleanor once wrote to him, “We are really very dependent on each other though we see so little of each other” (98).

As the administration transitioned from fighting domestic problems to fighting the Axis powers, Eleanor grew fearful. She sought to preserve New Deal liberalism despite the imminent crisis of World War II. For Eleanor, the war was not real business. She commented on the seemingly wonderful time—too wonderful for Eleanor—that Franklin and Winston Churchill had planned the war. Eleanor commented that Franklin and Churchill “looked like two little boys playing soldier” (456). She was bored by the simple and practical layout of Fort Bragg suggested that curved streets would make it

more appealing. Meanwhile, Franklin, the politician had to adjust his focus. He became more interested in diplomacy and strategy. Franklin, frequently, reminded her that winning the war was paramount. And with this in mind, he made peace with his former enemy, big business. Franklin replaced Dr. New Deal with Dr. Win the War.

Eleanor, however, did not relent. She remained her husband's conscience. No cause was insignificant. Her passion fueled an unending empathy. Upon learning that an injured soldier was a pianist, she invited him to use the White House piano. She believed government's most important role—its moral imperative—was to eliminate all society inequalities. She was an idealist, while Franklin was a pragmatist. She forced Franklin to enact liberal policies toward European refugees, especially Jews fleeing the Holocaust. She fought and lost a battle to admit Jewish refugees as war broke out. She called the Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long “a fascist” (312). She fought for labor unions. During World War II, she supported women in war industries by urging the creation of child care centers. She also continually urged her husband to seek better treatment for black Americans. Right or wrong, Eleanor never doubted her causes.

As first lady, she blazed her own trail. She wrote a six-day-a-week column entitled “My Day” from wherever she happened to be – home or abroad. Eleanor also developed several close relationships that seem to fulfill a need for a type of love that her marriage did not provide. One of these was with Joseph P. Lash, a young idealist, who came to love her and whom became one of her most trusted confidants. Another close friend was Hickok, a former Associated Press reporter, who gave up her career to live in the White House with Eleanor. The letters between Eleanor and Hickok were passionate and “possess an emotional intensity and a sensual explicitness that is hard to disregard”

(256). Still, Goodwin argued that there is no evidence proving a physical relationship. Eleanor purposely led a separate life from her husband. She distanced herself. During the war, Franklin approached Eleanor about having a more traditional marriage. The request caused her great emotional anguish. In the end, she denied the request. She was her own force with an entirely different sense of independence, competence and confidence.

However, the working relationship was not without its problems and criticisms. In 1941, Eleanor had herself appointed assistant director of the Office of Civil Defense, becoming the first presidential spouse to hold an official position in her husband's administration. Her tenure did not last long. Eleanor resigned four months later after being criticized by Congress and the media. Fiorella LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City and Eleanor's superior at the Office of Civil Defense, believed the goal of the program was to better prepare American cities for attack. He sought practical measures: the improvement of fire stations and the establishment of air raid shelters.

For Eleanor, civil defense meant tackling social injustices. Eleanor wanted to use civil defense funds to provide jobs to unemployed Americans, establish child care centers and construct nursing homes. According to Goodwin, "To Eleanor's mind the stresses and dislocation of war – such as migration, unemployment, housing and health – were creating social problems as acute, if not so dramatic as anything to be anticipated from bombing" (323). Eleanor thought America had to strong internally before it could be strong internationally. Also, she tended to hire close friends such as Melvyn Douglas, an actor, and Mayris Chaney, a dancer, to raise public morale. She was accused of boondoggling and wasting public funds. Reports surfaced that Douglas and General

MacArthur made the same amount of money. And as a result, public criticism began to mount. LaGuardia became angry as did Congress, who took action. Congress prohibited the use of civilian funds for “instruction in physical fitness by dancers” (325). For the first time in nearly eight years as first lady, Eleanor was criticized. Realizing that she was doing more harm than good, she resigned.

Although Goodwin admired the First Lady’s political activism, she offered a brutal portrait of her shortcomings. Her passion was relentless. Goodwin admitted that although Eleanor was Franklin’s “eyes and ears,” she was seldom his hostess. In early 1944, Eleanor and Franklin’s daughter, Anna, served as hostess. Anna tried to shield her ailing father from strain and stress but Eleanor often made his difficult. At one White House cocktail hour, Anna described how her mother entered, had one drink quickly and then began to pester her father. Roosevelt lost his temper and threw a pile of papers across his desk. Eleanor apologized; Franklin poured a drink and started a story. Anna understood the pressure her father was under. She understood that he needed to relax. However, Eleanor did not. The arguments between the Roosevelts were often bitter. Toward the end of his life, Eleanor seemed oblivious to the rapid decline in her husband’s health that was apparent to everyone else. Her zeal made her blind. Eleanor continued to push her husband endlessly despite his problems with completing daily tasks. She appeared unsympathetic. Despite their disagreements, the Roosevelts still maintained mutual affection and respect for each other. Their vision for America was the same – they sought to change America for the better. Goodwin pointed out that the cause of their arguments was over the pace of change, never the direction.

In *No Ordinary Time*, Goodwin seemed to argue that World War II had a far greater effect on the mid-twentieth century than the New Deal. However by employing a biographical approach, Goodwin also highlighted the efforts of individuals—especially Eleanor’s crusade for social justice. Although at times the book excessively delved into the private lives of its colorful characters, the biographical approach worked. It enlivened such mundane topics such as wartime tax reform and labor disputes. And in so doing, Goodwin provided not only a biography of the Roosevelts, but a clear impression of World War II America.