

# A Controversial Woman

## Standard/Objective

- Analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture. (NCSS)
- Students will write response letters to the first lady's resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and compare their letters with the actual response letter.

## Materials

copies of *Eleanor's Resignation Letter*; copies of the historical background information (page 52); copies of the student activity sheet (page 53); copies of the *Text of Eleanor Roosevelt's Resignation Letter* (page 54); copies of the *Response Letter from the President General of the DAR* available on the CD (letter.jpg)

## Discussion Questions

- What is segregation?
- In what ways could an institution encourage segregation?
- Do you think Mrs. Roosevelt's resignation from the DAR made any difference? How?
- Was this a courageous act or just an easy way out of the organization?
- In your opinion, could Mrs. Roosevelt have done something else to make a statement?
- Is it right for someone to stay in an institution if their beliefs conflict with the actions of that institution?

## Using the Primary Source

Remind students that slavery ended when the Civil War was over, but racism still lingers in the hearts of some groups and institutions. Ask the first two discussion questions and allow students to respond. Have students read the historical background information (page 52) and follow with the resignation letter from Eleanor Roosevelt. Then divide the students into small groups. Ask the discussion questions and allow students to respond to their groups while gaining feedback from the other members. The students can then come back together as a class and share various answers and opinions.

Explain that the DAR president general wrote a response letter to Mrs. Roosevelt. Before allowing them to see the actual response letter, have the students take on the role of the president general of the DAR and write their own response letters to Mrs. Roosevelt. Distribute the student activity sheet and have students work in pairs to create this response letter to Mrs. Roosevelt. After students complete the letter, have them read the original letter that Mrs. Henry M. Robert, Jr. wrote and compare it to their own.

## Extension Idea

- Have students hold a debate about whether or not people should remain part of organizations with which they disagree. Assign some students to defend staying with an institution to change it from the inside out. Assign the other group of students to defend leaving an institution when its actions conflict with one's conscience.

# A Controversial Woman *(cont.)*

## Historical Background Information

Eleanor Roosevelt was the niece of one United States president and the wife of another. She was the first child of Anna and Elliot Roosevelt, one of the wealthiest families of that time. Her mother grieved over the lack of beauty found in her daughter, even discussing it with friends in front of Eleanor. The world in which Eleanor was born into valued beauty in a woman more than anything else. On the other hand, her father adored Eleanor and she felt secure and loved in his presence. Elliot, the younger brother of Theodore Roosevelt, was irresponsible and unpredictable. His drinking binges lasted for days and became so bad that his family had him admitted to an asylum to prevent further damage to the family name. Soon after, Eleanor's mother died from diphtheria. Since her father was unfit to care for Eleanor and her two little brothers, they were sent away to live with her mother's mother, Grandmother Hall. When Eleanor was just 10 years old, her father died.

Eleanor lived with Grandmother Hall on her estate with her brothers. When she was 15 years old, she was sent to a girl's boarding school in England where she was taught the importance of social and political justice. This progressive education was the forming ground for Eleanor's future. She was taught to be independent and politically aware of the situations that surrounded her. Instead of social graces, intellect was valued. This was a world where Eleanor finally fit in.

Theodore Roosevelt, or Uncle Ted, also instilled a strong sense of social responsibility in Eleanor. She accepted her plush lifestyle along with the idea that she should give back to those less fortunate. To do this, she volunteered her time working twice a week at the University Settlement House, a place where immigrants were taught how to adapt to life in America. She also joined the National Consumers League, which exposed horrible working conditions to which women and children were subjected.

Eleanor continued her efforts in social work off and on throughout her husband's political career as governor of New York. When her husband was elected president in 1933, she continued her mission as the eyes and ears of the president. She visited the poor and needy throughout the world, urging her husband to do something about their plight. Her involvement and outspoken personality drew criticism from opponents. Political cartoons of Eleanor circulated, but she developed a tough skin and continued her work.

Southern segregationists had typically dominated the Democratic party until Roosevelt took office in 1933. Roosevelt was against segregation and during his terms in office appointed African Americans to high offices in the government. Eleanor also hated segregation and fought for racial equality. She even invited the National Council of Negro Women to tea at the White House, an unprecedented act.

In 1939, the Daughters of the Revolution denied Marian Anderson, an African-American opera singer, the opportunity to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. The Daughters of the American Revolution, or DAR, was an organization devoted to patriotism and the preservation of memories of those who fought in the American Revolution. To be a member, one must be a direct descendent of a participant from the Revolution. The DAR had a rule that excluded African-American performers from Constitution Hall because its members had heavily protested blacks and whites sitting together during black artist's performances. Eleanor was outraged at this injustice and resigned her membership with the DAR. She worked behind the scenes to get Marian Anderson another concert at the Lincoln Memorial where on Easter Sunday, 75,000 people gathered to hear Anderson sing about liberty.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Resigning with a Conscience

## Background Information

When Mrs. Roosevelt heard that the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a group in which she was a member, refused the world-renowned opera singer Marian Anderson a concert at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. because she was an African American, she sent a letter of resignation to the DAR. This act brought racial discrimination to the national spotlight and assured the public that segregation would not be a part of the Roosevelt administration.

## Activity

**Directions:** You are the president general of the Daughters of the American Revolution and have just received Mrs. Roosevelt's resignation letter. Mrs. Roosevelt is the most popular and controversial woman alive today. What will you say to her? What can be said to a person who resigns over a conflict with her conscience? Using the space below, write her a letter in response to her resignation.

After you complete your letter, read the actual letter written by Mrs. Henry M. Robert, Jr., the president general of the DAR. Compare the letters; pointing out how you think her letter could have been more effective and repentant.

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## Challenge

When did the Daughters of the American Revolution begin and how many women are presently members of the Daughters of the American Revolution? Find out how a person could prove her right to membership. Has the DAR recanted its actions concerning the Marian Anderson event?

# Text of Eleanor Roosevelt's Resignation Letter

February 26, 1939

My dear Mrs. Robert:

I am afraid that I have never been a very useful member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, so I know it will make very little difference to you whether I resign, or whether I continue to be a member of your organization.

However, I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist. You have set an example which seems to me unfortunate, and I feel obliged to send in to you my resignation. You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed.

I realize that many people will not agree with me, but feeling as I do this seems to me the only proper procedure to follow.

Very sincerely yours,

*Franklin D. Roosevelt Library*

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

February 26, 1939.

My dear Mrs. Robert:

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Very sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Eleanor Roosevelt". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.