

Eleanor Roosevelt's four basic rights, 1944

Introduction

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a lifelong advocate of equal rights, used her position as First Lady to advocate against discrimination in the United States. However, Mrs. Roosevelt's ideas were not embraced by everyone in the pre-civil rights era when segregation and racism were institutionalized in American economics, politics, and society. In this letter from 1944 Mrs. Roosevelt responded to one of her critics, Addie Frizelle, who worried about the desegregation of restrooms and forced social interaction between the races in the government's movement toward racial equality in some spheres.

The First Lady deftly responded to the woman, dismissing her concerns about socialization and desegregation, while enumerating the "four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot."

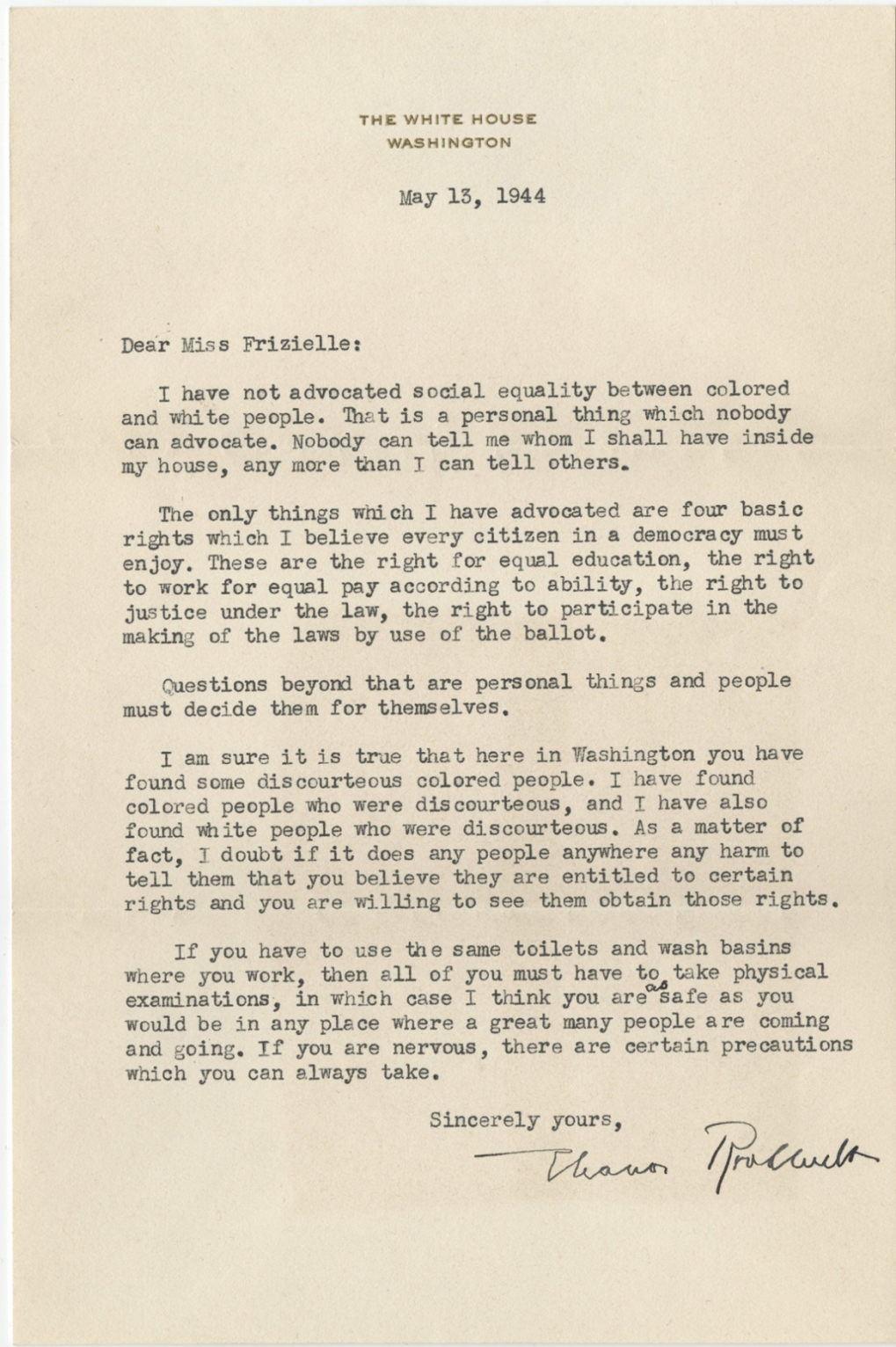
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image of the Eleanor Roosevelt's letter, and read the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Note the date of the letter. From your knowledge of American history and the comments of Eleanor Roosevelt, what forms of discrimination did "colored people" then face in the United States? (Note: "Colored people" could be used as a polite term for people of color, blacks, or African Americans in 1944.)
2. Why did Eleanor Roosevelt, in her answer to Miss Frizelle, distinguish between public discrimination and personal, social interaction between races?
3. How did Mrs. Roosevelt hope to use her position as First Lady and her support of four basic rights to: a) Improve the lives of African Americans, and b) Educate the entire American public?
4. Extra Assignment: Research the current First Lady, Michelle Obama, and recent First Ladies such as Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton. Describe initiatives of each to improve the lives of Americans.

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Image



Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizelle, May 13, 1944. (Courtesy of Seth Kaller, Inc.)

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Transcript

Eleanor Roosevelt to Addie Frizielle, May 13, 1944.

May 13, 1944

Dear Miss Frizielle:

I have not advocated social equality between colored and white people. That is a personal thing which nobody can advocate. Nobody can tell me whom I shall have inside my house, any more than I can tell others.

The only things which I have advocated are four basic rights which I believe every citizen in a democracy must enjoy. These are the right for equal education, the right to work for equal pay according to ability, the right to justice under the law, the right to participate in the making of the laws by use of the ballot.

Questions beyond that are personal things and people must decide them for themselves.

I am sure it is true that here in Washington you have found some discourteous colored people. I have found colored people who were discourteous, and I have also found white people who were discourteous. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it does any people anywhere any harm to tell them that you believe they are entitled to certain rights and you are willing to see them obtain those rights.

If you have to use the same toilets and wash basins where you work, then all of you must have to take physical examinations, in which case I think you are as safe as you would be in any place where a great many people are coming and going. If you are nervous, there are certain precautions which you can always take.

Sincerely yours,

Eleanor Roosevelt