



Eleanor Roosevelt holds a poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (©UN Photo Archives)

How One Woman Changed Human Rights History

First Lady. Feminist. Icon. Eleanor Roosevelt shaped the post-WWII world — and her legacy remains as powerful as ever



United Nations Foundation

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Exactly 70 years ago — on December 10, 1948, just after midnight — the United Nations General Assembly saw its first standing ovation for a single delegate. One by one, members representing 51 nations across the globe rose from their chairs to honor a 64-year-old woman seated among them.

Eleanor Roosevelt had just made history.

For the first time the world had come together to agree, in writing, on the fundamental freedoms that belong to all people on earth. It was fittingly called the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Imagine an international Bill of Rights; in fact, that’s

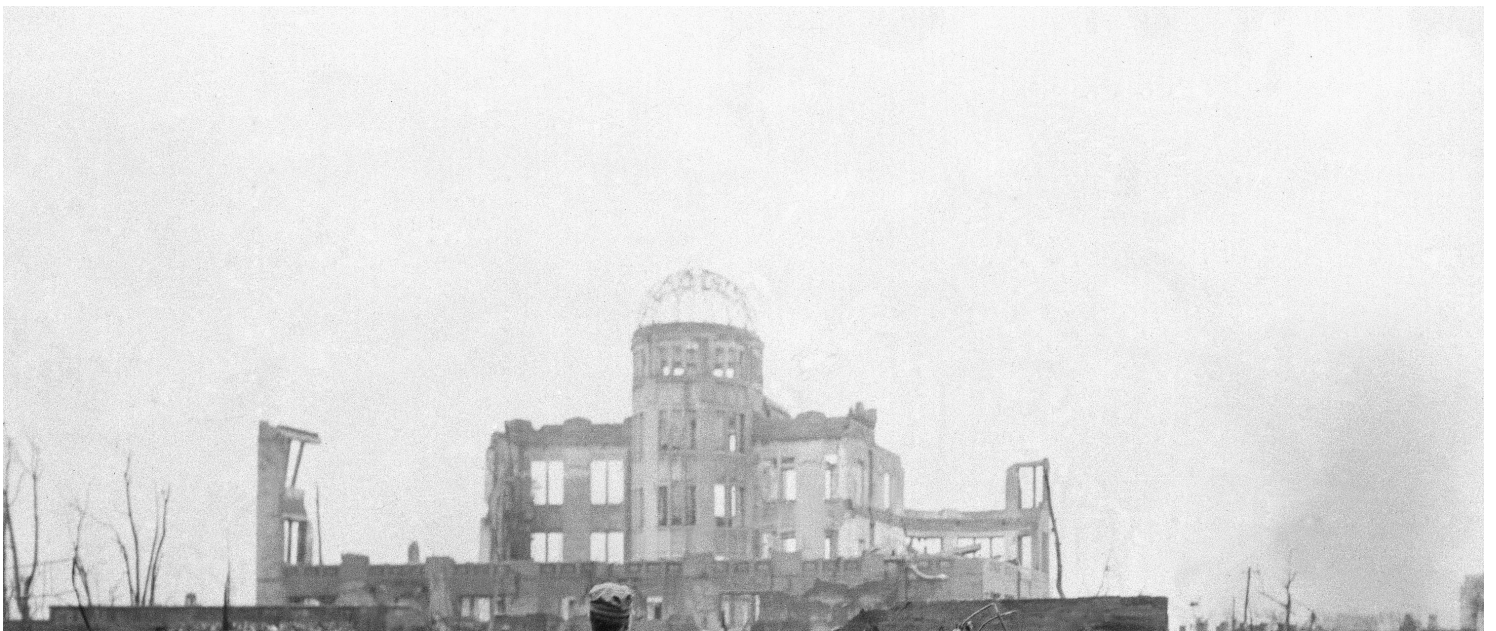
what some UN delegates called it before the official name was decided. And the former First Lady and widow of President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been its driving force.

“We stand today at the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life of mankind,” Roosevelt said in her speech at the Assembly.

“This Declaration may well become the international Magna Carta for all men everywhere.”

Indeed in the seven decades since its adoption, this Declaration — sometimes known by its acronym “UDHR” — has become the most translated document in the world, available in 500 languages. It serves as a moral guide for the UN and people around the world, and laid the legal groundwork for the International Criminal Court, the tribunals that prosecuted war crimes in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, and the national constitutions of nearly 20 countries.

And this declaration, like the UN itself, rose from the ashes of the deadliest war in human history.

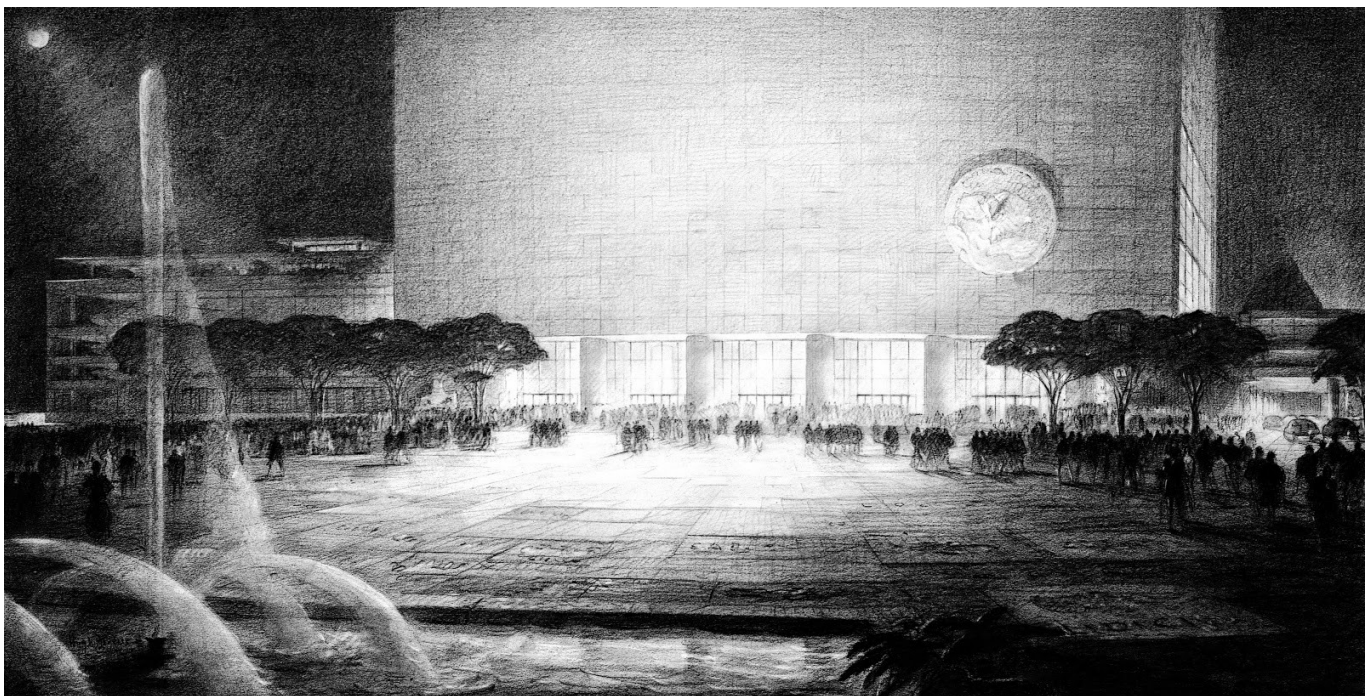




An Allied correspondent examines the destruction in Hiroshima, Japan, one month after the first atomic bomb used in warfare was dropped by the United States on Aug. 6, 1945. (Stanley Troutman/AP)

Few on the planet were untouched by the horrors of the Second World War. Millions of soldiers from a dozen different countries had died on the front lines, while millions more had been starved or killed as a result of Adolf Hitler's genocide against Jews, Catholics, the disabled, and other minorities. In total, as many as 60 million lives were lost in World War II. The scale of death, destruction and sheer inhumanity traumatized a generation.

In the war's immediate aftermath, the UN — and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — was created in part to prevent this kind of global warfare from ever happening again.



A proposed sketch from 1947 of the future site of the United Nations headquarters in New York (©UN Photo Archive)

The idea for an international bill of rights first came up in San Francisco in the spring of 1945, four months before WWII was officially declared over. It was at this historic conference that the UN charter was first signed. Less than a year later, President Harry Truman nominated Eleanor Roosevelt to be the country's first U.S. representative to the UN, calling her the new "First Lady of the World."

In 1946, the UN created the Human Rights Commission to put into words what an international bill of rights meant to all 51 founding Member States. The full committee convened in January 1947 on Long Island, in an abandoned factory that had manufactured spare airplane parts during the war. Until 1950, the factory served as the UN's temporary headquarters.

When Roosevelt first met with the small team of diplomats and legal experts who had been assembled to draft the Declaration, tensions remained high and members of the Commission were strangers to one another. By the end of this first convening, the group had elected Roosevelt to be the Commission's chairwoman. It was her diplomatic debut.



In 1950, on the second anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, students at the UN International Nursery School in New York viewed a poster of the historic document. (©UN Photo

Creating a document of such epic proportion was no easy task. In addition to the obvious geopolitical, social, cultural, and linguistic hurdles, the Commission had to overcome philosophical disputes pitting Thomas Aquinas against Confucius, national rivalries still raw in the war's aftermath, and even the personal quirks of its members. Hernán Santa Cruz of Chile, for example, was known to argue “with great energy” as another delegate put it — often to the consternation of other members of the group.

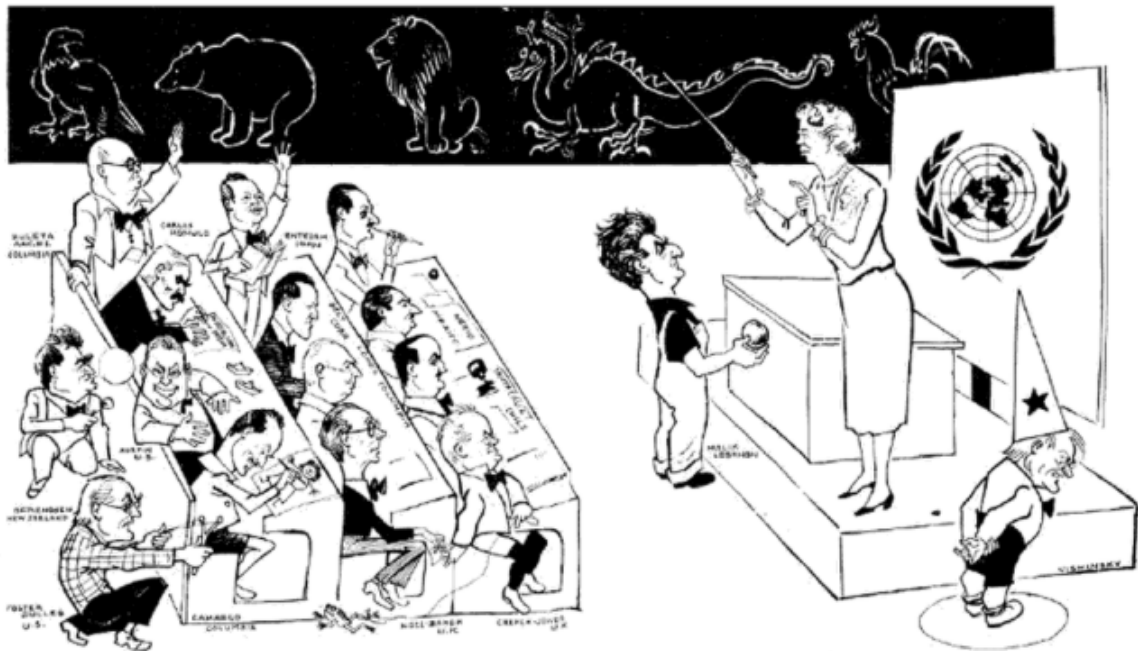


Eleanor Roosevelt being interviewed by Enrico S. Machado of Brazil during a meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in 1948. (©UN Photo Archive)

Some UN Member States argued that the Declaration itself was an expression of Western imperialism, one that disregarded the various cultural norms and traditions of other countries. The Soviet bloc, for example, argued against so-called “negative rights”

requiring governments to refrain from a specific action, like unlawfully seizing a citizen's property (Article 17).

To address this criticism, Roosevelt and fellow members of the Commission deliberately gathered contributions from a wide range of cultures and beliefs. The Lebanese philosopher and diplomat Dr. Charles Habib Malik played a crucial role in drafting the language, as did Peng-chun Chang of China, René Cassin of France, and John Humphrey of Canada. Each member of the commission brought unique perspectives to the table. (According to author Mary Ann Glendon in her book *A World Made New* about the Declaration's creation, Humphrey personally identified with disadvantaged people, having lost his left arm in an accident as a child and being orphaned at the age of 11).



*Eleanor Roosevelt, to her class on human rights, "Now, children, all together:
'The rights of the individual are above the rights of the state.'"*

A political cartoon characterizing Roosevelt's role on the UN Human Rights Commission. (Courtesy of A World Made New)

By all accounts, Roosevelt was tireless in her efforts as chairwoman, once saying, “I drive hard and when I get home I will be tired! The men on the Commission will be also!” In a political cartoon from the time, the Human Rights Commission was caricatured as a class of unruly schoolboys with Roosevelt serving as their teacher. The caption read: “Now, children, all together: ‘The rights of the individual are above the rights of the state.’”

“I drive hard and when I get home I will be tired! The men on the Commission will be also!”

“She was in many ways the quintessential multilateralist, looking beyond her national interests and recognizing that certain values and interests transcend national agendas,” UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour recently told the UN Foundation during a Q&A about the Declaration’s lasting impact. “She had to make the case that certain rights are common to all countries — and this in a time when the world was still very polarized.”

Then, as now, the countries charged with upholding basic human rights were far from perfect. During negotiations in 1948 that sometimes lasted into the early hours of the night, Roosevelt and delegates from the Soviet Union exchanged barbs about civil rights abuses in each other’s countries, each accusing the other of violations that were true on both sides. Soviet delegates, for instance, criticized the U.S. government’s mistreatment of African-American citizens. At one point, Roosevelt offered to let a team of UN investigators document the American South’s social justice issues if Soviet delegates would allow the same. (They declined).





Eleanor Roosevelt with Lebanese diplomat Charles Habib Malik during a UN meeting in Paris. Both served on the UN Human Rights Commission tasked with drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
(Photo courtesy of the FDR Presidential Library and Museum)

In the end, the Declaration’s preamble and 30 articles — which drew from the American Bill of Rights, the British Magna Carta, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man — covered the entire spectrum of human rights, from economic freedoms like the right to equal pay for equal work (Article 23), as well as political ones, like protection from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile (Article 9).

The landmark language was also inspired by FDR’s “Four Freedoms” — **freedom of speech, worship, want, and fear** — which he had warned during his 1941 State of the Union Address were in jeopardy if the U.S. did not join its allies in WWII.





Eleanor Roosevelt arrives with other members of the U.S. delegation at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, where the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was officially passed on December 10, 1948. (©UN Photo/Marvin Bolotsky)

At four minutes to midnight on December 9, 1948, the final vote was taken in Paris. It passed in the small hours of the following morning with a tally of 48–0. While none dissented, eight countries abstained from the vote, including Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union, and South Africa.

Even so, the declaration’s adoption marked a historic milestone. The UN General Assembly President at the time said of Roosevelt that she had “raised a great name to an even greater honor.”

The standing ovation Roosevelt received when the Universal Declaration passed is almost ironic given how she first entered the UN a few years earlier. When she attended her first meeting, Roosevelt later confided that she was nervous she wouldn’t be respected by her colleagues or taken seriously. She didn’t have a college degree, and she was often the only female in the room. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she endured criticism by male colleagues that she was “shrill” and “school marm-ish.” She was the only woman in the U.S. delegation to the UN.





Eleanor Roosevelt, with her Scottish Terrier Fala at her side, sits with visitors from UNESCO on the grounds of her home in Hyde Park, New York in July 1948. (©UN Photo/Kari Berggrav)

Despite her lack of higher education, Roosevelt already had more life experience than many of her colleagues when she joined the Human Rights Commission. As First Lady to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, she had traveled all over the world, becoming one of the most engaged and outspoken women in the history of the White House. Before her husband was elected President in 1932, Roosevelt was terrified of public speaking. By the end of her public life, she was hosting a daily radio show, playing disc jockey for WNYC, and addressing world leaders in auditoriums and closed-door meetings.

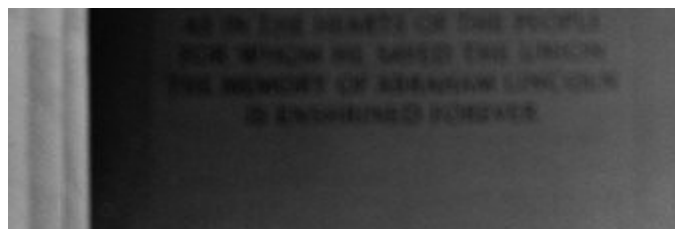
“She met a lot of people and she loved people intensely until the day she died,” Roosevelt’s great-granddaughter Perrin Roosevelt Ireland says. “It’s a testament to her capacity as a leader and as a human.”

During the first session of the UN General Assembly, Roosevelt — or “ER” as she referred to herself — delivered a speech about displaced families that led to a unanimous vote for the right of refugees to choose their destinations of asylum. Her son James would later tell historian Doris Kearns Goodwin that his mother’s greatest regret was failing to convince FDR to admit more refugees to the U.S. before World War II. According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, she even tried to personally sponsor a refugee.



Eleanor Roosevelt delivers a speech in New York about the United Nations Association of the United States of America. After serving as the U.S. representative to the UN, she personally founded dozens of UNA-USA chapters across the country. (Photo credit: FDR Presidential Library and Museum).

Even before her appointment to the UN, Roosevelt had earned a reputation as a civil rights advocate. By the time she was voted as the Commission's chairwoman, she had already taken up the causes of equal rights for women, African-Americans, and Depression-era workers in the U.S. In 1939, when the African-American singer Marian Anderson was denied the use of Washington D.C.'s DAR Constitution Hall because of her race, Roosevelt personally arranged for her to perform on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial instead.





Marian Anderson sings at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after being denied use of DAR Constitution Hall because of her race. Eleanor Roosevelt personally arranged the alternative concert venue. (©Thomas D. McAvoy — The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images)

Roosevelt understood the importance of building grassroots support. She bolstered public backing for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by helping mobilize religious groups, peace activists, legal scholars, and political figures from smaller countries.



Eleanor Roosevelt during a visit to Camp Tera — a residence for unemployed women — near Bear Mountain, New York (©Getty Images); Roosevelt presents Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with an award from the Americans for Democratic Action in 1961. (Photo courtesy of the Bowery Boys History)

She also knew that raising American awareness for the newly established United Nations — and the Declaration itself — must begin at the local level. So for the remainder of her public life, that’s just what she did, by personally founding dozens of chapters of the UN Association of the United States of America, otherwise known as UNA-USA.

In one of her last speeches at the UN, Roosevelt famously asked:

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin?

In small places, close to home — so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world.

Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works.”

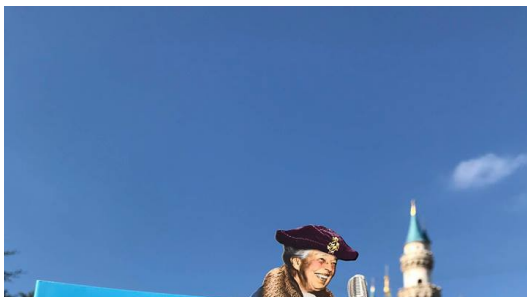
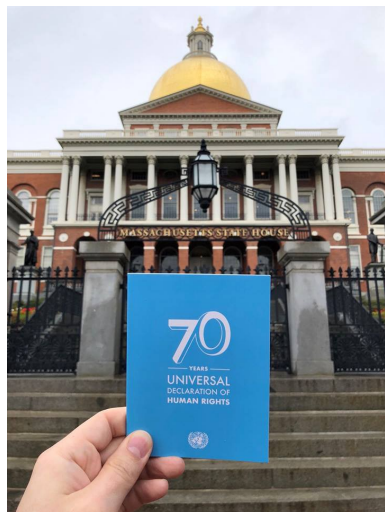


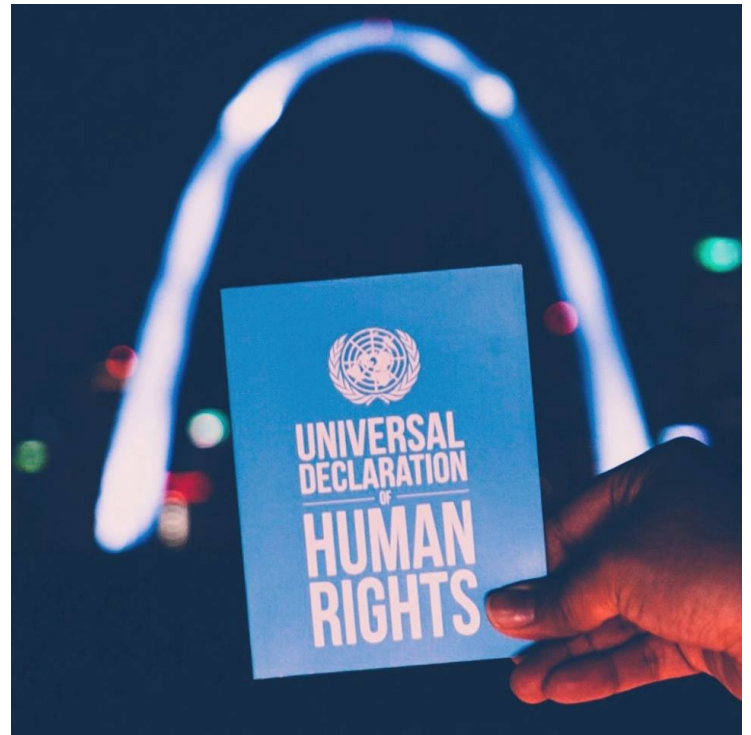


Eleanor Roosevelt stands with a group of girl scouts in Kentucky. Throughout her life, she believed in the power and importance of civic groups like the Girl Scouts and the United Nations Association of the United States of America for upholding the country's ideals and rights. (©Photo courtesy of the FDR Museum)

Seventy years later, Roosevelt's maxim holds true — and her legacy is as proud as ever. In September, I met a young woman from Dallas who told me that First Lady Roosevelt had personally launched her city's UNA-USA chapter, and how honored she felt to be continuing what Roosevelt started.

Earlier this fall, to celebrate the UN and honor the Declaration's 70th anniversary, my fellow colleagues at the UN Foundation — a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. that mobilizes people, resources, and ideas to support the UN's mission — traveled to more than 30 states across the country to sing the gospel of human rights at home. UNF staffer Marco Sanchez personally visited nearly half a dozen states to address hundreds of students and community members of UNA-USA, reminding anyone who enjoyed a summer vacation that this right to rest and leisure is protected under Article 24.





From San Francisco to central Illinois, UNF staffers traveled across the U.S. earlier this year to meet with dozens of community and campus chapters of UNA-USA and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Photos courtesy of UNA-USA).

“One of the things I loved about her is that she really believed in the UN process and she believed in the capacity of citizens through the UN Association to ask the UN to stand up for its promises,” Roosevelt’s great-granddaughter Perrin Roosevelt Ireland said at UNA-USA’s 2018 Global Engagement Summit, which is held each year at the UN’s headquarters in New York and brings together more than 1,500 grassroots activists, students, and community leaders from across the country.

Roosevelt considered her work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be her proudest and most important accomplishment. Yet as her great-granddaughter said

earlier this year at the UN General Assembly, this document remains “the unfinished ethical agenda of our time.”

In many ways, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals unanimously passed by all 193 UN Member States in 2015, which include ambitious goals like no poverty, zero hunger, and gender equality, are the action plan to realize the Declaration’s ideals for everyone, everywhere.

And once again, as with the Universal Declaration, we must rely on the support of communities, civic groups, entrepreneurs, scientists, artists, activists, and leaders to turn these paper promises into reality — including in one’s own backyard.

“We are going through a tough time right now with the brain drain, the loss of coal and lots of poverty,” says Emily Frasa, a college student at West Virginia University and a member of her campus’ UNA-USA chapter. “West Virginia is almost a microcosm for global issues. So being able to connect our state with the globe and find that common understanding is really what the UN is all about.”

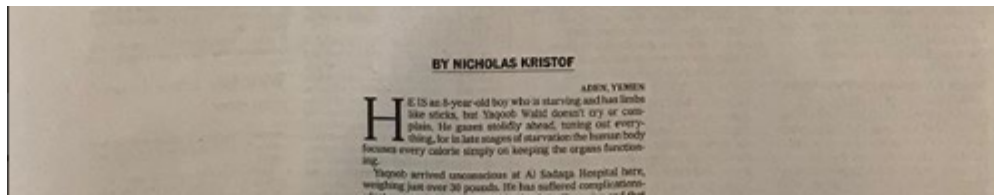


Eleanor Roosevelt listens to fellow delegates in New York in 1947. (©UN Photo/Kari Berggrav)

Like many of the Declaration's framers, Roosevelt understood that poverty and discrimination were often the root causes of armed conflict and the kind of atrocities like those witnessed in WWII. FDR did too, including "freedom from want" among his four freedoms. When he signed the UN Charter, Truman remarked, "Experience has shown how deeply the seeds of war are planted by economic rivalry and social injustice."

Even 70 years later, this statement feels as relevant — and ominous — as ever. Millions of people still suffer from poverty, hunger, and violence around the world. The poorest and most vulnerable among us are increasingly marginalized, and even demonized. Right now, as UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour puts it, we're witnessing a "**cruel scapegoating of minorities**," from Central American migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. to the mass killing and rape of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar. Meanwhile, economic inequality continues to grow. And conflict in places like Yemen fuels widespread hunger and other injustices.





At the same time, the world is witnessing what Gilmour calls a clamp down of human rights defenders. “In country after country, the space is closing for civil society,” he said. “We see this in harsh laws to restrict NGOs, often under the guise of counter-terrorism, and in the growing number of cases of restrictions and reprisals against human rights defenders.”

That’s why we need everyone, everywhere to stand up for human rights, says Kathy Calvin, President and CEO of the UN Foundation. “Whether this means running for office, reaching out to your lawmaker, or raising your voice in your own community, we all have a part to play to protect each other’s rights and freedom.”

Putting Human Rights Into Words



This summer, Roosevelt’s great-granddaughter Perrin Roosevelt Ireland addressed the UN General Assembly in New York, saying:

“Her legacy is an incomplete one. The things that Eleanor Roosevelt was fighting for — and the things she worried about — still haunt us today, especially when we consider the

current global refugee crisis, the global war on women and the ongoing legacies of colonialism.”



Members of the 4-H club present a United Nations flag to Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman in Delaware in 1950. (©Photo courtesy of the FDR Museum)

In her later years, Roosevelt would often remind her successors at the UN that creating the Universal Declaration was just the beginning of a long process. The hard work really comes in carrying out these ideals in our own daily lives.

“Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being.”

Throughout her life, she called on all people — including and especially Americans — to uphold the ideals enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, saying:

“Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility.”

In her book, *A World Made New*, author Mary Ann Glendon writes:

“People not yet born will pass judgement one day on whether we enhanced or squandered the inheritance handed down to us by Eleanor Roosevelt ... and other large-souled men and women who strove to bring a standard of right from the ashes of terrible wrongs.

How we measure up will depend in part on today’s leaders, especially those who chart the course of the world’s one remaining superpower.

But what will be decisive is whether or not sufficient numbers of men and women ‘in small places, close to home’ can imagine, and then begin to live, the reality of freedom, solidarity and peace.”

. . .

— *M.J. Altman, Senior Communications Officer at the United Nations Foundation*

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