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**Publisher**

European Association for American  
Studies

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://ejas.revues.org/11914>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.11914

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Electronic reference**

Melissa Cooper, « Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's Influence in the 1930s Anti-Lynching Movement around a 'New Philosophy of Government' », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Vol 12, no 1 | 2017, document 4, Online since 12 March 2017, connection on 20 March 2017. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/11914> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11914

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# Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's Influence in the 1930s Anti-Lynching Movement around a 'New Philosophy of Government'

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<sup>1</sup> Lynching and mob violence spiked at the beginning of the 1930s as racial tensions heightened during the Great Depression.<sup>i</sup> With growing public concern over the treatment of black Americans, President Franklin D. Roosevelt faced increasing domestic and international pressure to curtail mob violence. Even German Chancellor Adolf Hitler wrote to FDR in "protest against an uncivilized custom of broiling helpless victims by mobs," and encouraged FDR to deplore mob violence. "I would consider it a great favor," he wrote, "if you would use your own good and powerful office to better protect your defenseless [sic] black people."<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, leading American civil rights activists pressured the President for a federal solution to lynching throughout the decade. Recognising FDR's willingness to push through legislation to aid national recovery in the wake of the economic crisis, prominent organisations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) hoped that the President would also lend his powers to aid the campaign for civil rights.

<sup>2</sup> With the belief that every citizen, regardless of race, was entitled to due process, the NAACP resolved that it was the role of the state to be a guarantor of justice. Between 1934 and 1935, the NAACP lobbied the White House for its support of the Costigan-Wagner federal anti-lynching bill. Named after Democratic Senators Edward P. Costigan of Colorado and Robert F. Wagner of New York, the bill outlined provisions for the federal government to prosecute participants in lynch mobs, public officials, and law enforcement officers who failed to protect prisoners in their custody against a mob. Ultimately the Costigan-Wagner bill, as well as all subsequent attempts to legislate against lynching, did not succeed; every bill fell victim to a filibuster in the Senate and no

anti-lynching legislation was ever passed by Congress. It was because of these anticipated filibusters and southern objections to anti-lynching legislation during the 1930s that the NAACP pursued presidential endorsement of their bill so doggedly. The benefits of this endorsement would have been incredibly valuable to the NAACP as the presidential actions that could result in the passage of their anti-lynching bill were numerous.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In theory the liberalism espoused by the FDR aligned with the liberalism championed by the NAACP as both advocated greater state intervention to remedy social inequalities: the Association maintained that it was the federal government's responsibility to protect black lives and the New Deal offered hope to reformers who sought greater federal intervention in problems such as poverty, poor housing, and unemployment. But in practice, FDR remained silent on the bills and did not accede to the NAACP's demands. FDR even told NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White that he would not endorse the bill. In a 1934 meeting with Walter White at the White House, FDR was reported to have said, "If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, [Southern Senators] will block every bill I ask Congress to pass."<sup>iv</sup> Despite this, the NAACP continued to pressure FDR for his support in the hope that if the President recognised the need for such a bill he would endorse the Association's efforts.

<sup>4</sup> But as FDR's White House staff tried to keep White and the controversial subject of anti-lynching from the president's attention, the NAACP corresponded with Eleanor Roosevelt in order to develop an alternate route through which to reach the president. There is wide-sweeping academic agreement regarding Eleanor Roosevelt's part in the 1930s anti-lynching movement. Her role as conduit between FDR and Walter White has been uncontended for decades and her influence has always been regarded as positive. Current interpretations of Mrs. Roosevelt's influence in the anti-lynching movement can be split into two categories. The first concerns the impact it had on her own reputation and public image. Scholars such as Tamara K. Hareven and Mildred Abramowitz praised Mrs. Roosevelt for her work with black Americans. They suggested that she was ahead of her time, and in many cases single-handedly fought discrimination and promoted equality to Americans in such a way that they would not lose their American ideals.<sup>v</sup> Her willingness to engage with black social issues such as lynching therefore benefited her own image and is seen as evidence of her personal political views.

<sup>5</sup> The second line of interpretation considers the effect of Mrs. Roosevelt's actions on how black Americans perceived FDR. As James R. Kearney argued, when FDR was unable or unwilling to endorse anti-lynching legislation, Mrs. Roosevelt reassured the NAACP of the President's interest, and placed the administration in opposition to lynching. Consequently, the First Lady assured black audiences that it was "not the intention of those at the top" that black Americans should be subject to discrimination.<sup>vi</sup> Nancy J. Weiss, and later Doris Kearns Goodwin argued that such comments, combined with Mrs. Roosevelt's willingness to engage with black Americans, boosted the image of the administration. In Kearns Goodwin's book *No Ordinary Time*, the author noted that "though the president had taken no specific initiatives in behalf of the Negroes, and had failed to support the anti-lynching campaign, he managed, with Eleanor's substantial help, to convey to blacks that the administration was on their side."<sup>vii</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt's efforts therefore contributed to a shift in the black vote from Republican to Democrat during FDR's second term elections as her rapport with the black electorate reflected well upon her husband.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Because Mrs. Roosevelt acted as an unofficial representative of the administration, her communications need to be understood in light of FDR's attitude towards lynching and the political position that he espoused. This will show how effectively Mrs. Roosevelt communicated the administration's position to the NAACP and will highlight her intentions in the messages she conveyed. For this reason, this article first considers FDR's anti-lynching rhetoric to establish FDR's views on lynching. While scholars have argued that FDR shied away from lynching and the anti-lynching movement to maintain the support of southern senators for his economic policies, in fact, FDR spoke about lynching three times during this period.<sup>ix</sup> The rhetoric in these speeches challenges the traditional narrative surrounding FDR and lynching and suggests that FDR wanted to bring lynching under the umbrella of his federal crime control reforms, in doing so distancing himself from the NAACP's anti-lynching bill.

<sup>7</sup> This essay then reinterprets Eleanor Roosevelt's role as conduit between FDR and the NAACP in light of FDR's views. Accordingly, this study argues that through wishful thinking and enduring optimism, in her correspondence with Walter White, Eleanor Roosevelt placed the administration in support of the NAACP's federal anti-lynching bill, a bill that FDR did not support. Consequently, this heightened tensions between FDR and the NAACP, who expected FDR to act on the Costigan-Wagner bill's behalf. The intention in this article is to interrogate one of Mrs. Roosevelt's early attempts as First Lady to intervene in national politics. Her role in this instance came at a time when she was unsure of her reach as First Lady. After only a year in the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt was uncertain of how far she could go to support controversial causes, such as anti-lynching and desegregation, without damaging FDR's political aspirations. Mrs. Roosevelt's communications with anti-lynching activists reveal that her own attempts at domestic diplomacy drew upon her previous political experience in order to build relations between black reformers and the administration in the 1930s. But what scholarship has neglected to-date, and this article seeks to reconcile, is how her actions impacted on relations between the NAACP and FDR, and how they affected the NAACP's political aspirations.

## FDR's Stance on Lynching

<sup>8</sup> When Eleanor Roosevelt acted as a conduit between the Walter White and FDR she often directly relayed messages between the two men, in doing so she shared the President's thoughts on lynching. FDR's stance on lynching and anti-lynching have typically been defined by his public silence on the NAACP's federal anti-lynching bills. This silence has previously been explained and excused by FDR's need to keep quiet on controversial subjects in order to push through his New Deal Economic reforms.<sup>x</sup> His aides argued that it would not be politically expedient for him to be associated with the anti-lynching movement and often purposefully kept anti-lynching from his attention. This essay does not contest that FDR distanced himself from the bills. It does, however, challenge accepted notions about FDR's stance on lynching and anti-lynching.

<sup>9</sup> While FDR avoided talking about specific anti-lynching bills, he confronted lynching throughout his presidency and spoke about it three times between 1933 and 1935. Surprisingly, scholars have neglected to analyse FDR's anti-lynching rhetoric. But this is largely because FDR spoke rarely on civil rights issues and even more infrequently about lynching. These speeches, however, clearly outline FDR's position on the subject, and

reveal that just like his New Deal economic reforms that aimed to build on “the ruins of the past,” FDR framed lynching in the language of social and political disrepair, extending his ‘new philosophy of government’ to combat lynching.<sup>xi</sup> While FDR did not outline any specific policies on lynching during this time his speeches suggested he wished to expand the powers of the federal government to allow it to fight lynching. FDR’s practice of using rhetoric to frame future policy refers to what scholars have deemed ‘the rhetorical presidency,’ an essential feature of the ‘modern presidency.’<sup>xii</sup> As he did with his New Deal reforms, FDR also rhetorically framed lynching during his first term as president. When FDR appeared to take no action on lynching, instead he laid the foundations for future federal action by establishing his own anti-lynching rhetoric. This essay therefore first considers FDR’s anti-lynching rhetoric between 1933 and 1935—the period when he was seen to take the least action against lynching—to understand his position on lynching and how he legitimised potential future federal reforms against the practice.

<sup>10</sup>In December 1933, FDR spoke for the first time about lynching in a speech to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCC). FDR asserted that “we know that [lynching] is murder and a deliberate and definite disobedience of the Commandment, ‘Thou shall not kill.’”<sup>xiii</sup> While on the surface the President appeared to merely denounce mob violence, the broader context of the speech actually contained the seed of what would become FDR’s public strategy towards lynching during his time in office.<sup>xiv</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Up until the 1930s lynching had been largely understood to be a consequence of cultural conflict with social and economic causes, yet during his speech FDR presented a simplified explanation for lynching.<sup>xv</sup> Just like America’s other social ills, he suggested, lynching was just another sign of a country in disrepair. First and foremost, lynching was a symptom of broken government: “The judicial function of government is the protection of the individual and of the community through quick and certain justice. That function in many places has fallen into a sad state of disrepair.”<sup>xvi</sup> FDR highlighted that lynching had flourished because the function of government had been inadequate. While lynching has been talked about in terms of the law for a century by social commentators, activists, and journalists—even the NAACP made these arguments to justify federal intervention—the federal government had never openly recognised this until this point.

<sup>12</sup>FDR attributed the state of government to a detrimental cultural exchange that resulted in the corruption of those in “high places.” There was no longer a “great gulf that separated the privileged from the underprivileged,” he mused, and values of low culture had seeped into those of the ruling elite. But, FDR declared, “we do not excuse those in high places or in low who condone lynch law,” and deplored law enforcement officers who took part in the practice. In order to fix the situation, “it must be part of our program to re-establish [the proper function of government].”<sup>xvii</sup> The solution to mob murder, according to FDR, was to tackle the root cause; lynching was a problem of government that could in turn be solved by the function of government. Since their founding the NAACP framed lynching in terms of race and the law, whereas FDR firmly framed lynching in terms of the law and only the law.<sup>xviii</sup> FDR had turned lynching into a colour-blind issue that had a colour-blind solution.

<sup>13</sup>In no uncertain terms FDR situated his anti-lynching rhetoric firmly within the context of his nation-building New Deal policies that legitimised the expansion of federal powers in the national interest. Crime, just like economic crises, could be solved by strong government, he argued. FDR therefore called for “action by collective government... toward the ending of practices such as [lynching].”<sup>xix</sup> FDR brought the

rhetoric of civil rights in line with his other policies by framing mob violence in the bureaucratic language of the New Deal. But this was a significant speech as it clearly marked FDR's desire to end lynching and hinted at how it might be achieved.

<sup>14</sup> Following FDR's denouncement of lynching in his speech to the FCC the NAACP were convinced of FDR's interest in seeing an end to lynching. Walter White even sent a telegram to the President expressing his gratitude. "Thank you a thousand times," White exclaimed, "for your magnificent and unequivocal condemnation of lynching tonight. Twelve million negroes and many millions of whites applaud your every word."<sup>xx</sup> The excitement of a presidential statement condemning lynching and advocating federal action meant that NAACP activists expected FDR to progress towards an endorsement of their federal anti-lynching bill. Consequently, White bombarded the White House with letters and telegrams imploring the President to speak out in favour of the Costigan-Wagner bill. Stephen Early, FDR's Press Secretary commented that "[White's] file of correspondence is voluminous," as he relentlessly sought presidential endorsement.<sup>xxi</sup> While FDR's first speech unequivocally denounced lynching it was vague on the details about how the federal government would quash the practice. Given the NAACP had a ready-made next step in the form of their anti-lynching bill, it made sense to them that FDR would go on to endorse their bill. While the NAACP advocated their Costigan-Wagner bill, the President would later suggest a solution that extended federal powers to make law enforcement more effective to tackle such crimes.

<sup>15</sup> Proving that his comments on lynching in his speech to the FCC were not a one-off, the President reaffirmed his commitment to stop lynching a month later in his State of the Union Address on 3rd January 1934. FDR claimed that "crimes of organized banditry, cold-blooded shooting, lynching, and kidnapping have threatened our security."<sup>xxii</sup> He called for their "immediate suppression" and asked the Congress to cooperate, to build "a new structure designed better to meet the present problems of modern civilization."<sup>xxiii</sup> While lynching was not a primary focus of the State of the Union address, its inclusion in the speech indicated a firm desire for the eradication of lynching. The State of the Union address typically allows the president to recommend issues to Congress for their consideration. Given that in the rest of the speech FDR mentioned providing further relief for unemployment, regulating business, ending crimes that stemmed from prohibition, seeking repayment of debts owed by foreign nations, and taxation reform—all areas that he later took action on—his inclusion of lynching in this particular speech was a compelling indicator that anti-lynching was on the president's agenda.

<sup>16</sup> FDR's anti-lynching rhetoric was inextricably bound with his rhetoric surrounding the 'war on crime.' The war on crime was an initiative that saw the federal government expand their role towards crime control to tackle crimes—broadly those mentioned by FDR in his State of the Union Address—which developed out of the prohibition era.<sup>xxiv</sup> In order to achieve this, under FDR's advisement, the Department of Justice proposed a legislative program for tackling crime that Attorney General Homer Cummings deemed the "Twelve Point Program."<sup>xxv</sup> The Program dealt with racketeering, the transportation of stolen property in interstate or foreign commerce, stealing from banks operating under the laws of the United States, fleeing the state to avoid prosecution or the giving of testimony, to name just a few.<sup>xxvi</sup> But both the DOJ and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) pursued agendas that would increase federal authority to tackle a range of crimes during the first half of the 1930s. Whilst a provision to make lynching a federal crime was not explicitly a part of this program, FDR's anti-lynching rhetoric suggested that federal

powers could be expanded to tackle lynching in the same way. Historian Clare Potter offered an explanation for the absence of lynching on the programme by arguing that the war on crime “projected a vision of a moral and efficient state,” designed to rally white middle class voters around the New Deal and increased federal intervention without disturbing racial or class hierarchies.<sup>xxvii</sup> Open support for an anti-lynching measure was likely to lose FDR support. But in extending federal powers to fight crime more broadly, lynching could be tackled by the institutions of federal law enforcement.

<sup>17</sup> Evidence of an alternate approach to tackling lynching came at an address given by FDR to a national conference on crime convened by Attorney General Homer Cummings between 10th and 13th December 1934.<sup>xxviii</sup> The conference met to discuss the future of federal crime control and was attended by six hundred representatives from national, state, and local institutions as well as independent organisations.<sup>xxix</sup> The conference appealed to its delegates for ideas on how to transform federal crime control and FDR gave an address to the delegates that escalated his anti-lynching rhetoric and revealed his own remedy for lawlessness. His address featured recurrent themes from his previous speeches showing that lynching would be included in a broader program for crime control.

<sup>18</sup> FDR advocated a dispassioned response to lynching. In doing so he attempted to divert public attention away from the crime itself towards more practical solutions. “At one moment popular resentment and anger may be roused by an outbreak of some particular form of crime such, for example, as widespread banditry; or at another moment, of appalling kidnappings; or at another, of widespread drug peddling; or at another, of horrifying lynchings.” But the American people, Roosevelt argued, “must realize the many implications of that word ‘crime.’ It is not enough that they become interested in one phase only.”<sup>xxx</sup> While FDR mentioned lynching, he only did so to reinforce his point that the crime could not be reduced by targeting the perpetrators alone. In doing so, he distanced himself from the NAACP’s Costigan-Wagner bill that focused specifically on lynching and bringing lynchers to justice.

<sup>19</sup> With no specific crimes on the agenda, it was clear that this conference was about the function of federal government and how to make it a more effective machine for tackling crime. FDR asserted that the federal government was not prepared to deal with contemporary crime and lamented that criminals “have been better equipped and better organized than have the officials who are supposed to keep them in check.” According to the conference programme, the delegates considered “crime prevention, detection, apprehension, police administration, prosecution, court organization and administration.”<sup>xxxi</sup> There were significant problems with many of these phases of crime control that had been identified as contributing factors in lynchings. Some lynchings were advertised in advance and could have been prevented with a more efficient response from law enforcement. Additionally, law enforcement had trouble in apprehending lynchers; members of mobs frequently absconded, or were well known to have taken part in a mob but were still never apprehended. Few lynchers were ever prosecuted at local or state level either, indicating that there were several aspects of the criminal justice system and crime control practices which could be reformed to stop lynchings.

<sup>20</sup> FDR made a direct statement regarding the increase of federal power, and more specifically, its capability to tackle crime. The President proclaimed that, “Widespread increase in capacity to substitute order for disorder is the remedy.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This was a distinct

rhetorical escalation from a year earlier when he had only alluded to the idea of federal intervention. It reflected the nature of FDR's rhetorical methods. He would float an idea and then gradually strengthen the rhetoric surrounding it until he could assert what he wanted, and felt that he would be supported.

<sup>21</sup> It appeared then, that both the NAACP and FDR had the same goal: for the federal government to take responsibility for lynching. FDR's methods for doing so, however, were profoundly dissimilar to the NAACP's. Instead of endorsing the NAACP's federal anti-lynching bill that sought to bring lynchers to justice—something that would have hurt his broader New Deal legislative agenda, FDR used strategic rhetoric in speeches to suggest that a better way to stop lynching was to expand the powers of federal law enforcement to make the state more effective at each phase of crime control, removing the need to make lynching a federal crime or for FDR to publically support the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. In light of this, FDR's lack of public endorsement for the Costigan-Wagner bill cannot merely be explained away as a lack of interest in the issue. The President did not simply ignore lynching because it was politically expedient to do so. Instead, FDR was active in shaping his own anti-lynching strategy, it was just not the one the NAACP advocated. But unless these speeches were read and interpreted side by side, the thrust of FDR's arguments would have been easily missed. The speeches were spaced out over the period of a year and to make things even less clear, his speeches were never solely about lynching. His anti-lynching rhetoric was presented alongside other New Deal reforms—especially in his State of the Union speech and his address to the crime conference. Additionally, FDR's words were just that—words. During his first term he offered no tangible policies that directly related to lynching. For this reason the NAACP could not understand why FDR would not speak out in favour of their bill given his denouncement of lynching and clear statements that the federal government should assume responsibility for the practice.

## Eleanor Roosevelt's Opposition to Lynching

<sup>22</sup> Bearing in mind that FDR did not firmly situate lynching within his crime control rhetoric until long after the Costigan-Wagner bill was introduced into Congress in January 1934, the NAACP pursued presidential endorsement for their anti-lynching bill during this time on the basis that FDR firmly denounced lynching in December 1933 and January 1934. But as Walter White's biographer, Janken, noted that as the Costigan-Wagner bill progressed through Congress, "getting FDR's attention, however, was becoming more difficult, as his staff who were more favourably disposed to southern politicians, tried to filter out African American perspectives from the President's attention."<sup>xxxiii</sup> White was forced to look for alternative channels through which to access the president. It was for this reason that White forged a relationship with the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, to establish an informal route to the president.

<sup>23</sup> During the campaign for the Costigan-Wagner bill, whenever White required action from the White House, he would ask Eleanor Roosevelt to try to sway FDR around to his way of thinking. White urged Mrs. Roosevelt to soften FDR's objections to the Costigan-Wagner bill, persuade him to insist on congressional votes, to get her to arrange meetings with the president for him, to make appearances and speeches at numerous events, to get FDR to speak out against lynching or in support of anti-lynching legislation, and to present FDR with articles or information regarding lynching.<sup>xxxiv</sup> But if FDR opposed the



NAACP's anti-lynching legislation because he had his own vision to bring lynching under the control of the federal government, then Mrs. Roosevelt's communications with Walter White had very different consequences to those previously argued. This section therefore reinterprets Mrs. Roosevelt's communications with Walter White in light of FDR's speeches on lynching in the early 1930s. Accordingly, it argues that Mrs. Roosevelt achieved two key things in her communication with Walter White. Firstly, she reaffirmed the notion that the administration opposed lynching. This was consistent with FDR's rhetoric, and led Walter White to persist in seeking FDR's endorsement. But in communicating that message to White, she also unofficially placed the administration in favour of anti-lynching legislation.

<sup>24</sup>In communicating with Walter White over anti-lynching legislation, Mrs. Roosevelt pushed the boundaries of the First Lady's involvement in White House politics and established her own role as First Lady. In her autobiography Mrs. Roosevelt said that all she expected of her husband during his presidency was "that [the administration] would be interested in accomplishing the things that should be accomplished since government is supposed to serve the good of the people."<sup>xxxv</sup> In bringing lynching and the NAACP to FDR's attention, Mrs. Roosevelt positioned herself as FDR's conscience, and nudged him to consider marginalised issues of national importance.

<sup>25</sup>Mrs. Roosevelt built upon her political experiences during the 1920s to communicate with the NAACP. In the previous decade Mrs. Roosevelt was a member of the Women's Trade Union League and the Women's City Club of New York, formed to coordinate middle-class female reformers in New York City. She was also in the New York Democratic Party and acted as a facilitator between female reformers in the social justice feminist movement and male politicians.<sup>xxxvi</sup> She knew the importance of building relationships between reformers and politicians to form coalitions and successful political partnerships in order to enable legislative reform. She built on her skills in the women's reform movement and lent her experience to facilitate a relationship between the NAACP and FDR's administration later in the 1930s. Just as Mrs. Roosevelt had expanded the role of women in national politics a decade before by pushing to include reform issues within the Democratic Party, Mrs. Roosevelt expanded the role of First Lady to advocate for specific reforms that she thought her husband should champion as President.

<sup>26</sup>With this experience behind her Mrs. Roosevelt corresponded with Walter White on issues that concerned their drive to push a federal anti-lynching bill through Congress. It is important to start by noting that Mrs. Roosevelt was aware of FDR's position on the Costigan-Wagner bill. FDR had personally informed his wife of his objections to such a bill when she asked him if he would ask Congress to pass an anti-lynching bill on behalf of the NAACP. FDR replied in a memorandum, "In view of the simple fact that I keep repeating to Senate and House leaders that the White House asks only three things of this Congress (appropriations, a tax bill and a relief bill)... I think that no exceptions can be made at this session."<sup>xxxvii</sup> While the First Lady openly communicated these objections to White it highlighted that Mrs. Roosevelt knew of FDR's stance against the NAACP's bill, and that any comments made that did not align with this stance were entirely her own.

<sup>27</sup>Despite this, Mrs. Roosevelt had a tendency to give a hopeful spin to each situation when she relayed FDR's refusals to accede to the NAACP's demands. Minor embellishments to FDR's words gave the NAACP hope of action on FDR's part when he had committed to no such thing. When communicating FDR's message that he would not ask

Congress to push through the Costigan-Wagner bill she said to White, “[FDR] says, in view of the fact that he is only asking three things of Congress, he does not see how he could specify this particular bill.” But in the same message she also speculated on FDR’s actions: “Of course he is quite willing that it should be pushed by Congress itself, and I feel quite sure he will give it any help he can.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> FDR did not say that he was willing to help the bill in his memorandum to the First Lady. But in trying to give the NAACP a positive outlook she alluded to potential presidential action to help the bill. Placing the administration in favour of anti-lynching legislation has previously been considered to be a positive consequence of her correspondence. However, it becomes problematic if FDR did not actually support the Costigan-Wagner bill and had his own ideas about how to bring lynching under the remit of the federal government.

<sup>28</sup> With little direct access to the President, White’s only way to gauge the President’s position on the anti-lynching bill was through Mrs. Roosevelt’s correspondence. Fortunately for White, the First Lady frequently relayed FDR’s hopes for the NAACP’s bill. After a particularly brutal lynching in Marianna, Florida, in which black farmhand Claude Neal was lynched for the suspected rape and murder of local white girl Lola Cannidy, White sent reports of the Association’s investigation into the lynching to highlight the NAACP’s case for legislative reform and dispute claims that an anti-lynching law was not needed.<sup>xxxix</sup> In the hope that details of this gruesome lynching would sway the president in the Costigan-Wagner bill’s favour, White contacted Mrs. Roosevelt to champion the bill on their behalf. She replied, “I talked with the President yesterday about your letter and he said that he hoped very much to get the Costigan-Wagner Bill passed in the coming session. The Marianna lynching was a horrible thing.”<sup>xl</sup> She continued to suggest that FDR supported anti-lynching legislation and on more than one occasion Mrs. Roosevelt suggested that FDR was “going to do everything he could” to get the Costigan-Wagner bill passed, that he was working “quietly to avoid raising too much opposition to the bill.”<sup>xli</sup> In doing so, Mrs. Roosevelt’s correspondence implied that FDR was taking an active role in aiding the passage of the Costigan-Wagner bill. Continuously denouncing the crime and alluding to presidential action gave the NAACP hope that FDR was on their side and had an interest in seeing the Costigan-Wagner bill passed because of a genuine interest in seeing an end to the crime.

<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, with the intention of being optimistic after the Neal lynching, in addition to speculating on her husband’s actions, Mrs. Roosevelt also speculated about the actions of the Department of Justice in response to the lynching in 1934. The NAACP demanded action from the DOJ on the case because Neal was taken from his cell in Alabama and across state lines by lynchers to Florida, where Neal was later killed. The NAACP attempt to get Attorney General Cummings to act under the 1934 amendment to the Lindbergh Kidnapping Act—part of FDR’s legislative program for crime control—which enabled federal action “for ransom or reward or otherwise.” Cummings did not yield to the NAACP’s requests. “I have serious doubts,” he wrote in an internal memo, “whether a court, bearing in mind that it is a criminal statute, would give it so sweeping an interpretation,” because he did not believe that Congress passed a Kidnapping statute wide enough in scope to use in the prosecution of lynching.<sup>xlii</sup> Despite this, and without contacting the DOJ to determine their official stance, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote to White, “I wish very much the Department of Justice might come to a different point of view and I think possibly they will.”<sup>xliii</sup> White was overjoyed after reading the First Lady’s letter. It “brightens the scene immensely,” he replied, “in bringing us good news that the

President is hoping to get the Costigan-Wagner bill passed in the coming session of Congress and that the Department of Justice may act in the Claude Neal case."<sup>xliv</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt's wishful thinking only set Walter White and the NAACP up for further disappointment when both FDR and the DOJ continued to take no action.

<sup>30</sup> But by instilling the NAACP with hope about future federal action, it actually delayed progress on their broader anti-lynching campaign. As the NAACP saw the opportunity for federal action, the Association continued to invest time, money, and effort in pursuing legislative avenues that the administration did not support—and would be difficult to push through Congress without open public support by FDR. However, the Association's reactions show that the NAACP had great trust in the First Lady and her insider knowledge. She had a great personal ability to form positive political alliances. However, Mrs. Roosevelt was clearly ill-informed on the stance of the DOJ, and regularly told Walter White that FDR hoped the bill would pass when he personally advocated for alternative solutions. They trusted her suggestions over their years of experience in communicating with the White House and the constant rejection they faced from federal law enforcement agencies in their attempts to bring lynchers to justice.

<sup>31</sup> After the Costigan-Wagner bill fell victim to a filibuster in 1935, Roosevelt's administration was clearly taken aback about Walter White's reaction to the situation, and in particular FDR's continued silence on the bill. Stephen Early commented that "Frankly, some of [White's] messages to the President have been decidedly insulting."<sup>xlv</sup> In response to FDR's silence on their anti-lynching bill White resigned from his position as member of the Advisory Council for the Government of the Virgin Islands. In his resignation letter, White wrote,

<sup>32</sup> It is a matter of great disappointment that you as President did not see your way clear to make a public pronouncement by means of a message to the Senate or otherwise, giving your open endorsement to the anti-lynching bill... It is my belief that the utterly shameless filibuster could not have withstood the pressure of public opinion had you spoken out against it... In justice to the cause I serve I cannot continue to remain even a small part of your official family.<sup>xlvi</sup>

<sup>33</sup> White's reaction was telling of his expectations of the President. Ultimately, Mrs. Roosevelt's reassuring letters led Walter White to place greater faith in the President than he should have. White had been expecting the presidential action that the First Lady had suggested and was outraged enough to resign his position in protest when that did not transpire. By implying the administration was in favour of the NAACP's anti-lynching bill, Mrs. Roosevelt only set White up for disappointment when FDR remained silent.

<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt specifically told White that FDR wanted to see the bill passed and that he hoped that it would pass. Even though she did not specifically say that FDR would actively work to get the bill passed, she did not tell Walter White that FDR would not work to get the bill passed either. This left the task of interpreting her letters up to Walter White. Desperate for any scrap of presidential support, White therefore took any positive message he received from Mrs. Roosevelt as confirming his belief that FDR wanted to see the bill passed. White wrote once that "I know personally of the President's deep interest in lynching and of his desire to see the Costigan-Wagner bill passed."<sup>xlvii</sup> This was a belief that Mrs. Roosevelt had reassured him of whenever FDR's stance was questioned. But FDR had specifically said that he could not ask Congress to pass the bill,

and his speeches on crime control suggest that he had his own anti-lynching agenda that conflicted with the NAACP's methods. White's resignation from his position indicated that FDR had not acted in the way that the Secretary had expected, in large part because Mrs. Roosevelt had not adequately managed the Secretary's expectations, and on some occasions had embellished FDR's responses in order to instil hope when the outcome looked bleak.

## Conclusion

35 FDR's anti-lynching rhetoric suggested that he wanted to bring lynching under the control of the federal government on his own terms, and not those of the NAACP. This gives an alternative explanation to his silence on the NAACP's bill. Instead of remaining silent to avoid controversial subjects when he needed the support of southern senators to pass his New Deal measures, FDR instead laid the foundations for alternative federal action that did not involve the civil rights organisation.

36 FDR may have publicly denounced lynching in his speech to the FCC, in his State of the Union address in 1934, as well as at the Attorney General's Conference on Crime, but he never spoke out publicly in favour of anti-lynching legislation. There was a disjuncture between the NAACP's solution to lynching and what FDR suggested. Instead of support the Costigan-Wagner bill or make lynching a federal crime, FDR laid the foundations for how he would tackle lynching. FDR rhetorically assuming federal responsibility for mob murder by arguing that lynching was a problem of the function of government. FDR therefore aimed to solve lynching by making the different aspects of crime control and criminal justice, from crime prevention to prosecution, more effective. Unfortunately FDR left no paper trail regarding policy initiatives for his anti-lynching strategy. Only FDR's public speeches remain, but the rhetorical patterns present in these speeches are consistent with how FDR constructed rhetorical narratives to support his other legislative proposals.<sup>xlviii</sup>

37 Instead of destroy the NAACP's hope of realising their objective of securing presidential endorsement for their federal anti-lynching bill, Eleanor Roosevelt offered the NAACP hope despite knowing that FDR would not endorse bill. In suggesting that the executive branch would take more action than they actually did, and subtly placing the administrations in favour of anti-lynching legislation, Mrs. Roosevelt raised the NAACP's expectations towards the administration. Consequently, NAACP leaders became ever more frustrated when FDR did not speak out in favour of their bill. Mrs. Roosevelt's communications therefore did not have entirely positive consequences for the administration. While black Americans may have seen the First Lady's engagement with the lynching issue as a symbol of friendship, in this case it only made the NAACP more sceptical of FDR's ability to ensure that the civil rights of black Americans were protected.

38 The First Lady had a great ability to gain the trust, friendship, and support of black leaders within the NAACP. She made them feel as though they were heard, even if she could achieve little for their anti-lynching bill personally. But Mrs. Roosevelt was successful in bringing the NAACP's reform movement to the President's attention, and it was important to her that FDR heard the Association's arguments for an anti-lynching bill, even if he did not agree with them. This reflected her ability to build her own positive relations with reformers, although this did not translate seamlessly when she tried to bridge the gap between the NAACP and the Roosevelt administration. But it

showed how Mrs. Roosevelt applied her knowledge of political reform to aid anti-lynching activists achieve their legislative objectives.

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## NOTES

- i. Statistics collected by Tuskegee Institute presented in Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 4-5.
- ii. Adolf Hitler to FDR, 1 June 1933, Box 93-A, Papers as President: Official File, FDR Papers, FDR Library.
- iii. First FDR assembled data and information from studies in the field of the proposed legislation, then he publicised the legislation to generate public support and to bring to bear the influence of constituents on their Congressmen. Using his relationship with congressional leaders he would later see that his bills were referred to sympathetic committees to ensure their passage. The President could therefore influence legislation through his personal relationships with individual senators, something the NAACP were keen to exploit. If presidential endorsement or active support for the Costigan-Wagner bill was obtained then, in essence, the president could lobby on behalf of the NAACP, relieving the civil rights activists of their mammoth task. Wilfred E. Binkley, *President and Congress* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 317.
- iv. Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 169-170.
- v. Tamara Hareven, 'The Social Thought of Eleanor Roosevelt,' PhD Thesis, Ohio State University (1965), 156; Mildred Abramowitz, 'Eleanor Roosevelt and Federal Responsibility and Responsiveness to Youth, the Negro, and Others in Time of Depression,' PhD Thesis, New York University, (1970).
- vi. James Kearney, *Anna Eleanor Roosevelt: The Evolution of a Reformer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), 84-5.
- vii. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time - Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 163-165.
- viii. Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- ix. Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 356-7; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time - Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 163; Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Betrayed: A History of Presidential Failure to Protect Black Lives* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 34; Kevin McMahon, *Reconsidering Roosevelt on Race: How the Presidency Paved the Road to Brown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15; Garth E. Pauley, *The Modern Presidency & Civil Rights: Rhetoric on Race from Roosevelt to Nixon* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 26-7; William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 58; Daniel Kato, *Liberalizing Lynching: Building a New Racialized State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 138; Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), x.
- x. This has been the prevalent view in scholarship for decades. One main reason for this narrative, and it's because FDR never took notes in any of his meetings or recorded his private

conversations. Therefore there is very little archival material available in regards to FDR's stance on lynching for historians to analyse. Historians have therefore only taken FDR's silence on anti-lynching bills, and his failure to endorse the movement as evidence that he had no desire to end lynching; Kevin McMahon, *Reconsidering Roosevelt on Race: How the Presidency Paved the Road to Brown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 40; Nancy Weiss, *Farewell*; Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2014); Kearns Goodwin, *Ordinary*.

**xi.** FDR, Message of the President to the Congress of the United States, 3 January 1934, FDR Papers, Master Speech File, Series 2, Reel 2, on microfilm at the FDR Library; FDR, Speech to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, 6 December 1933, FDR Papers, Master Speech File, Series 2, Reel 2, on microfilm at the FDR Library.

**xii.** Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); James Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency* (New York: Cengage Learning, 2010); Krebs, R. R., 'Tell Me A Story: FDR, Narrative, and the Making of the Second World War,' *Security Studies*, 24:1 (Jan-March, 2015) 133.

**xiii.** FDR, Speech to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, 6 December 1933, FDR Papers, Master Speech File, Series 2, Reel 2, on microfilm at the FDR Library.

**xiv.** The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America was a white religious organisation and around twenty-five Christian denominations were represented at the meeting.

**xv.** For contemporary literature on lynching see: Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1894* (1895); Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Montclair: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1969) (originally published 1933); NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching, 1889 - 1918* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) (originally published in 1919); Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* (New York: New York Age, 1892); Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1929); James H. Chadbourn, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1933).

**xvi.** FDR, speech at Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, 6 December 1933, FDR Papers, Master Speech File, Series 2, Reel 2, on microfilm at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, New York.

**xvii.** Ibid.

**xviii.** While lynching has been talked about in terms of the law for a century—and even the NAACP made legal arguments for the federal government to stop lynching—the federal government had never recognised this until now.

**xix.** Ibid.

**xx.** Walter White to Franklin Roosevelt, 6 December 1933, NAACP Papers, Box I: C206, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**xxi.** Stephen Early to Mrs Scheider, 5 August 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.

**xxii.** Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, 3 January 1934, FDR Papers, Master Speech File, Series 2, Reel 2, on microfilm at the FDR Library.

**xxiii.** Ibid.

**xxiv.** Clare Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 110.

**xxv.** 'A Twelve Point Program,' address by Attorney General Homer Cummings to the Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 19 April 1934, accessed on 29/01/16 at <http://www.justice.gov/ag/speeches-5>.

**xxvi.** From an address at "The Attorney General's Crime Conference," 10 December 1934, in Carl Swisher, (ed.), *Selected Papers of Homer Cummings: Attorney General of the United States, 1933-1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 43-4.

**xxvii.** Potter, *War on Crime*, 110.

- xxviii.** Transcript of FDR's 'Address to the Conference on Crime', 10 December 1934, accessed online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14792>.
- xxix.** Swisher, *Selected Papers of Homer Cummings*, 50.
- xxx.** FDR, 'Address to the Conference on Crime'.
- xxxi.** Ibid.
- xxxii.** Ibid.
- xxxiii.** Kenneth Janken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 219.
- xxxiv.** Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, 3 December 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 606, FDR Library; Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, 18 March 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.
- xxxv.** Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper, 1961), 191.
- xxxvi.** John Thomas McGuire, 'Beginning an 'Extraordinary Opportunity': Eleanor Roosevelt, Molly Dewson, and the expansion of women's boundaries in the Democratic Party, 1924-1934,' *Women's History Review*, 23:6, 923-5.
- xxxvii.** Franklin Roosevelt to Eleanor Roosevelt, 9 March 1936, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.
- xxxviii.** Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, 16 March 1936, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.
- xxxix.** James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); NAACP, 'The Lynching of Claude Neal,' 1934, NAACP Papers, Part 7, Series A, Reel 9, on microfilm at the Cambridge University Library; Memorandum for Walter White, 14 November 1934, NAACP Papers, Part 7, Series A, Reel 9, on microfilm at the Cambridge University Library.
- xl.** Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, 23 November 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 606, FDR Library.
- xli.** Eleanor Roosevelt quoted in Janken, K. R., *Walter White: Mr. N.A.A.C.P.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 209.
- xlii.** Attorney General Homer Cummings to Assistant Solicitor General MacLean, 28 November, 1934, in Swisher, *Selected Papers of Homer Cummings*, 38-39.
- xliii.** Ibid.
- xliv.** Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, 23 November 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 606, FDR Library.
- xlv.** Stephen Early to Mrs Scheider, 5 August 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.
- xlvi.** Walter White to Franklin Roosevelt, 6 May 1935, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 623, FDR Library.
- xlvii.** Walter White to Eleanor Roosevelt, 20 November 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Box 606, FDR Library.
- xlviii.** Colleen Shogan, *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987); James Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency* (New York: Cengage Learning, 2010).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article looks at Eleanor Roosevelt's role in the 1930s anti-lynching movement. In particular, the article reinterprets the impact of Mrs. Roosevelt's role as conduit between FDR and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. This article proposes that Mrs. Roosevelt's correspondence should be re-contextualised around a fresh interpretation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's stance on lynching. In light of this, Eleanor Roosevelt's early attempts at domestic diplomacy between FDR and the NAACP did not have entirely positive consequences.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Anti-Lynching, Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, Franklin D Roosevelt, National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), Walter White

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