

**LEADERSHIP THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAY:  
TIMELESS STRATEGIES FROM THE FIRST LADY OF  
COURAGE<sup>1</sup>**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR KAREN L. DOUGLAS<sup>2</sup>

*Women, whether subtly or vociferously, have always been a tremendous power in the destiny of the world.<sup>3</sup>*

This quote from Eleanor Roosevelt summarizes her faith in the power of women to effect change on a global scale. In her biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, Robin Gerber presents a chronological roadmap of Roosevelt's life, and broadcasts Roosevelt's call to action for women to grasp the courage within themselves to take their rightful place in world leadership. This book traces Roosevelt's life, from shy orphan to what is arguably the most accomplished female leader in American history. Roosevelt's evolution illustrates Gerber's point that regardless of a woman's background or temperament, she should become involved in shaping world events.

Gerber brings her academic skills as a senior scholar at the Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland to focus on Roosevelt's legacy of leadership. She illustrates Roosevelt's techniques by relating examples from Roosevelt's life and from the lives of contemporary women. This simplified look at Roosevelt's life makes for an easy-to-read book, which has the power to galvanize even the most inexperienced and sheltered of women to take a hand in constructing the world's future.

This review discusses the book's qualities as both a historical biography and as a leadership blueprint. Further, it discusses the book's failure to adequately explore the controversial but critical events in Roosevelt's life. Finally, it reviews the lessons learned from Roosevelt's life that are readily applicable to the life of a judge advocate.

Gerber introduces the theme of her book in the opening preface, stating that the book is a narrative biography, chronologically analyzing the

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1. ROBIN GERBER, *LEADERSHIP THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAY: TIMELESS STRATEGIES FROM THE FIRST LADY OF COURAGE* (2002).

2. U.S. Air Force. Written while assigned as a student, 52d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. GERBER, *supra* note 1, at 106.

leadership lessons Roosevelt learned in each part of her life.<sup>4</sup> Gerber wrote the book for women, intentionally employing the whole-life narrative concept because Gerber believes women respond better to such formats.<sup>5</sup> The author explains her approach in giving practical examples taken from Roosevelt's and other women's lives by opining that such examples bring immediacy and greater relevance to the leadership advice.<sup>6</sup> The contemporary examples Gerber provides were culled from her personal acquaintance, and through her study of women leaders at the University of Maryland's Academy of Leadership. Gerber's historical and biographical information regarding Roosevelt is soundly founded on the scholarly research of historical authors Blanche Weisen Cook, Allida Black, and James McGregor.<sup>7</sup>

Gerber presents a glowing biography of Roosevelt, focusing on positive and publicly acceptable events in Roosevelt's life. Gerber virtually ignores Roosevelt's likely victimization of incest by her uncles,<sup>8</sup> her permanent withdrawal of sexual relations with her husband,<sup>9</sup> her failures as a mother,<sup>10</sup> her failed Authurdale settlement experiment,<sup>11</sup> and the failure of her long-term romantic relationship with Lorena Hickock.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Gerber never addresses the well-documented lesbian affair<sup>13</sup> between Roosevelt and Hickock, instead offering only two passing mentions of Hickock.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, persons interested in reading a full and accurate biography on Eleanor Roosevelt should not rely on this book. The

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4. *Id.* at preface.

5. *Id.* at x.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. 1 BLANCHE WEISEN COOK, *ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, 1884-1933*, at 126 (1992). Gerber's book utterly omits this formative experience in Roosevelt's life. *See* GERBER, *supra* note 1.

9. *Id.* at 232.

10. *Id.* at 47. Gerber's chapter on "Mothering: Training for Leadership" brushes aside accusations by the Roosevelt children (and Roosevelt's own admissions) that she absented herself from her children's upbringing in order to devote herself to political pursuits, and instead laughably claims Roosevelt's leadership techniques were gleaned from her motherhood experiences. *Id.*

11. *Id.* at 115, 241. Gerber's minimizing treatment of the failed planned community (that cost the federal government a great deal of money, and the Roosevelt administration a great deal of embarrassment) is limited to a single paragraph that extols the failure as publicity for the plight of America's poor. *Id.*

12. RODGER STREITMATTER, *EMPTY WITHOUT YOU: THE INTIMATE LETTERS OF ELEANOR ROOSEVELT AND LORENA HICKOCK* 127 (1998).

13. *Id.* at 19.

14. GERBER, *supra* note 1, at 107, 134.

intentional omission of Roosevelt's failings focuses the book on using her successes as a leadership blueprint. These omissions are sometimes overwhelming to the point of becoming preposterous, and make Gerber's use of Roosevelt's biography suspect as nothing more than a vehicle to publish a leadership book. It appears that Gerber's academic studies led her to compile a twelve-step leadership recipe, which she then overlaid on Roosevelt's biography, regardless of the fit.

Roosevelt becomes interesting from a leadership perspective only after she learned of her husband's adulterous betrayal and rebuilt her life independently of him.<sup>15</sup> Gerber wisely chose not to begin the leadership lessons with the new and improved Eleanor Roosevelt of 1920. Instead, the book addresses the leadership techniques that Roosevelt employed in life, even though most women, including Roosevelt herself, would not recognize these life experiences as leadership training.

The first chapter, "Learn from Your Past," begins as each chapter does, with a quote from Roosevelt herself, "[c]haracter building begins in our infancy, and continues until death."<sup>16</sup> Through this chapter, Gerber explores how women can find the factors that shape our lives and color our perspectives by reflecting on our own past. Just as Roosevelt's deep empathy for the poor and oppressed surely arose from her own childhood feelings of rejection and abandonment,<sup>17</sup> women can learn about their own motivations by reflecting on their past.

Gerber urges the reader to write her own autobiography, and to draw from her own memories to focus on the positive lessons that came from those experiences. Gerber asserts we are shaped by our mentors and counsels proactively seeking out appropriate sources of inspiration and guidance. Just as Roosevelt relied on the tutelage of her boarding school headmistress, the author suggests everyone needs a mentor to guide her in finding her path.<sup>18</sup>

Gerber also recognizes that many potential leaders have, like Roosevelt, taken the time to first have a family, and then enter the world of leadership after their children are grown. While at first a military officer may scoff at the idea that leadership technique is learned by child-rearing,

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15. *Id.* at 76.

16. *Id.* at 2.

17. *Id.* at 10.

18. *Id.* at 41.

the point of Gerber's "Mothering: Training for Leadership" chapter can best be summed up in the words of Roosevelt herself, "[r]emember that a home requires all the tact and all the executive ability required in any business."<sup>19</sup> This chapter reminds the reader that life is the best leadership training there is, and that by examining our experiences in life, we can cull out more leadership training lessons than we recognize at first.

Gerber then addresses the transformative year of Roosevelt's life. Before 1918, Roosevelt admits she "had no sense of values whatsoever," and left all decision making to her husband.<sup>20</sup> Then, in 1918, while unpacking her husband's traveling trunk, Roosevelt found a stack of love letters that gave incontrovertible evidence that he was having an affair with her beautiful twenty-two year old social secretary.<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt secluded herself for a year, and spent her time in depression and anorexia.<sup>22</sup> After her year of personal agony, when she was entering her forties,<sup>23</sup> she abandoned her efforts to be an ideal wife, mother, and dutiful daughter-in-law, and instead built her own separate house, made the furniture to appoint it, and took her first steps toward becoming the most admired woman in history.<sup>24</sup>

The book's failure to adequately explore just what happened in that amazing year of transformation is likely not the fault of the author, since in the words of Roosevelt, "[r]eadjustment is a kind of private revolution."<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt's suffering was done privately and she never gave a full account of how she overcame her pain. Gerber does offer some illustrations of contemporary women who have undergone challenges in their personal and private lives. She concludes that you cannot avoid your share of personal disasters; it is one's response to them that determines whether your leadership potential develops.<sup>26</sup> She advocates the reader's acceptance of circumstances beyond one's control, belief in one's own resilience, positive diversion of energy, reflection on the negative event,

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19. *Id.* at 44.

20. *Id.* at 89.

21. *Id.* at 70.

22. *Id.* at 74.

23. *Id.* at xix. Roosevelt was born in 1884. *Id.*

24. The Gallup Organization, *65 Years of Polling History*, available at <http://www.gallup.com/content/?ci=9970&pg=2> (last visited Feb. 17, 2004) ("Eleanor Roosevelt has the highest average rank (1.1) among all women appearing on the list throughout its history.").

25. GERBER, *supra* note 1, at 66.

26. *Id.* at 82.

and optimistic faith in emerging as a stronger person.<sup>27</sup> This advice can be found in countless grief and divorce books penned throughout the last half-century and offers nothing new to the reader. Anyone searching for a blueprint on how Eleanor Roosevelt overcame such devastating grief as the death of her infant son<sup>28</sup> and the publicly humiliating betrayal by her will be sorely disappointed.

From there, the book explores the public figure that America came to embrace from 1920 onward. The book addresses finding a leadership passion in work that consumes your whole heart. Gerber recommends allowing yourself the gift of acting like a woman, instead of assuming leadership by imitating men.<sup>29</sup> Further, it urges against apathy, and stresses that leadership is not just a woman's right but also her responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

In a more practical sense, the book addresses many people's fears of public speaking by detailing Roosevelt's progression from a reluctant and poor public speaker into an effective orator, whose words and ideas were disseminated through public speaking engagements, her own newspaper column, books she published, and even her own television show.<sup>31</sup> The book reveals that it was a slow and deliberate process of trial and error and that it took quite some time for Roosevelt to lose an annoying high pitched giggle that distracted from her message.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Gerber effectively removes the reader's ability to hide from her call to leadership by professing to be a poor public speaker.

Politicians and the press viciously criticized Roosevelt for her liberal ideas. She suffered everything from jokes to all out attacks on her character.<sup>33</sup> Roosevelt's recommendation to "develop a skin as thick as a rhinoceros hide!"<sup>34</sup> succinctly sums up the chapter entitled "Face Criticism With Courage." Gerber gives practical guidance on how Roosevelt expected criticism to come with the territory and how she was prepared to

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27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 53.

29. *Id.* at 129.

30. *Id.* at 112. Gerber cleverly entitles her subchapter "Claim your Right to be a Leader," using "claim" as an imperative, and asserting that leadership is a woman's right. *Id.*

31. *Id.* at 281. Mrs. Roosevelt worked on television and radio with NBC studios, and eventually hosted a television program entitled, "The Prospects of Mankind." *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 140.

33. *Id.* at 166-67.

34. *Id.* at 156.

counter-attack her detractors' criticisms by being knowledgeable about her field.<sup>35</sup> Gerber also provides specific examples of Roosevelt's effectively handling criticism in a calm and dispassionate manner. Roosevelt's sage wisdom of "no one can make you feel inferior without your consent" strongly illustrates Gerber's point on how leaders should take criticism.<sup>36</sup>

After Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) death on 12 April 1945,<sup>37</sup> Roosevelt lost her husband's political clout as President and her status as First Lady. She found herself depending on the networks she had established over her lifetime to continue her work. This period of her life perfectly illustrates Gerber's recommendation that women create strong networks in order to become leaders. Roosevelt had done such a skillful job in creating a strong political network that she accomplished her arguably best work, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>38</sup> years after FDR's death. Gerber recommends following Roosevelt's example of maintaining loose contacts with everyone you meet and occasionally following up with those contacts to maintain the relationship.<sup>39</sup>

Roosevelt's last years of public service were spent as a United Nations Delegate and honorary ambassador to the United Nations.<sup>40</sup> Such an appointment was unlike any of her previous experiences and represented a huge risk to her. This part of Roosevelt's life is the basis for Gerber's chapter on embracing risk.<sup>41</sup> In taking the UN job, Roosevelt was going head to head with the Russian delegates over the fate of World War II refugees to determine whether they should be treated as traitors and forced to return home, as the Russians advocated.<sup>42</sup>

Though Roosevelt was at first apprehensive about taking the job as a UN delegate,<sup>43</sup> she accepted the risk of failure in sight of the whole world and the possible devastating consequences for the refugees should she lose her bid to protect them. She knew that her performance would either pave or block the way for future women delegates. Gerber points out that lead-

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35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 171.

37. *Id.* at 205.

38. *Id.* at 248.

39. *Id.* at 223.

40. *Id.* at 230.

41. *Id.* at 227.

42. *Id.* at 233.

43. *Id.* at 230.

ers are risk takers and she focuses the reader's attention on belief in oneself as the foundation for willingness to take risks. Gerber recommends discussing risk with your family, friends, and allies before undertaking it. She astutely reminds us that with risk comes failure, such as Roosevelt's Authurdale debacle, but that failure is not an excuse for future inaction.

Gerber also addresses the sunset of Roosevelt's life. She explains that though her body was aging, Roosevelt remained an active participant in life and continued educating herself about the world until her death at the age of seventy-eight.<sup>44</sup> In Roosevelt's words, "[y]ou must be interested in anything that comes your way."<sup>45</sup>

Sadly, the book mentions nothing about Roosevelt's unconventional marriage to Franklin D. Roosevelt and utterly fails to explore Roosevelt's love affair with Lorena Hickock. This book also fails to solve the mystery of how Eleanor Roosevelt transformed herself from a heartbroken, shy housewife, into an outspoken, fearless, public figure. It seems that Roosevelt decided that if her husband's rules did not apply to him, then they did not apply to her, and she was completely free to live by her own rules. Once that floodgate of open thinking hit her consciousness, the sky was her limit, all societal rules were open for review, and she could choose to live as she pleased. It makes sense to this reviewer that remarkable leaders disregard societal rules as they see fit.<sup>46</sup> A chapter of the book should have been dedicated to examining and rejecting society's rules that interfere with feminine leadership.

Finally, the book does not fully explore Roosevelt's stalwart diligence in obtaining her goals. The book's inclusion of a subchapter entitled "The Power of Conviction"<sup>47</sup> fails to fully address how doggedly determined Roosevelt was and how she did not let societal pressures to act like a lady deter her from her goals. Frankly, nobody is going to follow a leader who obeys societal pressures to "be a good little girl." Roosevelt certainly did not care whether she annoyed anyone by her persistence. She was a self-proclaimed "hair shirt"<sup>48</sup> to her husband, irritating and itching him whenever she felt the need to influence his policymaking. Further, she persis-

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44. *Id.* at xxi.

45. *Id.* at 265.

46. LEWIS V. BALDWIN, *THE LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., THE BOUNDARIES OF LAW, POLITICS AND RELIGION* 198 (2002). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. practiced civil disobedience by deliberately disobeying laws in order to further his struggle for civil rights.

47. Gerber, *supra* note 1, at 195.

48. *Id.* at 126.

tently contacted people to further her goals, even when they refused to take her calls.<sup>49</sup> Roosevelt's tenacious follow-through may have exasperated some, but she got the job done without worrying whether her diligence made her unladylike. Such an excellent leadership quality deserves a more thorough review.

After applying this book to the leadership challenges inherent in being a female judge advocate, it is clear that we have much to benefit from reading it. The book contains practical reminders to expand mentorship networks and to perfect our public speaking. Gerber challenges us to thoroughly examine our lives and get to know ourselves before taking on the challenges of leadership. The book raises, but does not resolve, the matriarch's dilemma of whether to place family or leadership first. Roosevelt tried to straddle the fence but she wound up a largely absent parent. Probably the most important aspect of this book for the leadership future of women in the Judge Advocate General's Corps is that of accepting our call to leadership duty. It is not only our right to lead, but our obligation. Roosevelt's example is as applicable to the judge advocate as it is to any political leader: do not wait for someone else to work for change, do it yourself.

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49. *Id.* at 196.



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