

Eleanor Roosevelt: Address to the United Nations General Assembly

On the Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

"This Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere."



delivered 9 December 1948 in Paris, France

Mr. President, fellow delegates:

The long and meticulous study and debate of which this Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the product means that it reflects the composite views of the many men and governments who have contributed to its formulation. Not every man nor every government can have what he wants in a document of this kind. There are of course particular provisions in the Declaration before us with which we are not fully satisfied. I have no doubt this is true of other delegations, and it would still be true if we continued our labors over many years. Taken as a whole the Delegation of the United States believes that this a good document -- even a great document -- and we propose to give it our full support. The position of the United States on the various parts of the Declaration is a matter of record in the Third Committee. I shall not burden the Assembly, and particularly my colleagues of the Third Committee, with a restatement of that position here.

I should like to comment briefly on the amendments proposed by the Soviet delegation. The language of these amendments has been dressed up somewhat, but the substance is the same as the amendments which were offered by the Soviet delegation in committee and rejected after exhaustive discussion. Substantially the same amendments have been previously considered and rejected Human Rights Commission. We in the United States admire those who fight for their convictions, and the Soviet delegation has fought for their convictions. But in the older democracies we have learned that sometimes we bow to the will of the majority. In

doing that, we do not give up our convictions. We continue sometimes to persuade, and eventually we may be successful. But we know that we have to work together and we have to progress. So, we believe that when we have made a good fight, and the majority is against us, it is perhaps better tactics to try to cooperate.

I feel bound to say that I think perhaps it is somewhat of an imposition on this Assembly to have these amendments offered again here, and I am confident that they will be rejected without debate.

The first two paragraphs of the amendment to article 3 deal with the question of minorities, which committee 3 decided required further study, and has recommended, in a separate resolution, their reference to the Economic and Social Council and the Human Rights Commission. As set out in the Soviet amendment, this provision clearly states "group," and not individual, rights.

The Soviet amendment to article 20 is obviously a very restrictive statement of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. It sets up standards which would enable any state practically to deny all freedom of opinion and expression without violating the article. It introduces the terms "democratic view," "democratic systems," "democratic state," and "fascism," which we know all too well from debates in this Assembly over the past two years on warmongering and related subjects are liable to the most flagrant abuse and diverse interpretation.

The statement of the Soviet delegate here tonight is a very good case in point on this. The Soviet amendment of article 22 introduces new elements into the article without improving the committed text and again introduces specific reference to discrimination. As was repeatedly pointed out in committee 3, the question of discrimination is comprehensively covered in article 2 of the Declaration, so that its restatement elsewhere is completely unnecessary and also has the effect of weakening the comprehensive principles stated in article 2. The new article proposed by the Soviet delegation is but a restatement of State obligation, which the Soviet delegation attempted to introduce into practically every article in the Declaration. It would convert the Declaration into a document stating obligations on states, thereby changing completely its character as a statement of principles to serve as a common standard of achievement for the members of the United Nations.

The Soviet proposal for deferring consideration of the Declaration to the 4th session of the Assembly requires no comment. And identical text was rejected in committee 3 by a vote of 6 in favor and 26 against. We are all agreed, I am sure, that the Declaration, which as been worked on with such great effort in devotion, and over such a long period of time, must be approved by this Assembly at *this* session.

Certain provisions of the Declaration are stated in such broad terms as to be acceptable only because of the provisions in article 30 providing for limitation on the exercise of the rights for the purpose of meeting the requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare. An example of this is the provision that everyone has the right to equal access to the public service in his country. The basic principle of equality and of nondiscrimination as to public employment is sound, but it cannot be accepted without limitation. My government, for example, would consider that this is unquestionably subject to limitation in the interest of public order and the general welfare. It would not consider that the exclusion from public employment of persons

holding subversive political beliefs and not loyal to the basic principles and practices of the constitution and laws of the country would in any way infringe upon this right.

Likewise, my Government has made it clear in the course of the development of the Declaration that it does not consider that the economic and social and cultural rights stated in the Declaration imply an obligation on governments to assure the enjoyment of these rights by direct governmental action. This was made quite clear in the Human Rights Commission text of article 23 that served as a so-called "umbrella" article to the articles on economic and social rights. We consider that the principle has not been affected by the fact that this article no longer contains a reference to the articles which follow it. This in no way affects our whole-hearted support for the basic principles of economic, social, and cultural rights set forth in these articles.

In giving our approval to the Declaration today it is of primary importance that we keep clearly in mind the basic character of the document. **It is not a treaty; it is not an international agreement. It is not and does not purport to be a statement of law or of legal obligation.** It is a Declaration of basic principles of human rights and freedoms, to be stamped with the approval of the General Assembly by formal vote of its members, and to serve as a common standard of achievement for all peoples of all nations.

We stand today at the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life of mankind. **This Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere.** We hope its proclamation by the General Assembly will be an event comparable to the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French people in 1789, the adoption of the Bill of Rights by the people of the United States, and the adoption of comparable declarations at different times in other countries.

At a time when there are so many issues on which we find it difficult to reach a common basis of agreement, it is a significant fact that 58 states have found such a large measure of agreement in the complex field of human rights. This must be taken as testimony of our common aspiration first voiced in the Charter of the United Nations to lift men everywhere to a higher standard of life and to a greater enjoyment of freedom. Man's desire for peace lies behind this Declaration. The realization that the fragrant violation of human rights by Nazi and Fascist countries sowed the seeds of the last world war has supplied the impetus for the work which brings us to the moment of achievement here today.

In a recent speech in Canada, Gladstone Murray said:

"The central fact is that man is fundamentally a moral being, that the light we have is imperfect does not matter so long as we are always trying to improve it ... we are equal in sharing the moral freedom that distinguishes us as men. Man's status makes each individual an end in himself. No man is by nature simply the servant of the state or of another man ... the ideal and fact of freedom -- and not technology -- are the true distinguishing marks of our civilization."

This Declaration is based upon the spiritual fact that man must have freedom in which to develop his full stature and through common effort to raise the level of human dignity. We have much to do to fully achieve and to assure the rights set forth in this Declaration. But having them put before us with the moral backing of 58 nations will be a great step forward.

As we here bring to fruition our labors on this Declaration of Human Rights, we must at the same time rededicate ourselves to the unfinished task which lies before us. We can now move on with new courage and inspiration to the completion of an international covenant on human rights and of measures for the implementation of human rights.

In conclusion, I feel that I cannot do better than to repeat the call to action by Secretary Marshall in his opening statement to this Assembly:

"Let this third regular session of the General Assembly approve by an overwhelming majority the Declaration of Human Rights as a standard of conduct for all; and let us, as Members of the United Nations, conscious of our own short-comings and imperfections, join our effort in good faith to live up to this high standard."
