

Mrs. Henry Weddington, Letter to President Roosevelt (1938)

Franklin Roosevelt's record on providing assistance to African Americans is mixed. Though New Deal programs undoubtedly assisted black people, many programs contained discriminatory elements. For example, early NRA regulations allowed lower payments for black workers. Moreover, as a Democrat, Roosevelt walked a fine line to maintain the allegiance of southern whites. Nevertheless, some of Roosevelt's actions opened doors for future progress. For example, he appointed several African Americans to high-ranking government positions—his so-called "Black Cabinet"—and he appointed Harry Hopkins to head of the WPA, where Hopkins instituted a color-blind hiring policy. Additionally, Eleanor Roosevelt was an outspoken opponent of racial discrimination. These actions convinced most African Americans voters to abandon their traditional support of the Republican Party. In 1936, 75 percent of black voters supported Roosevelt. The letter below reflects both Roosevelt's reputation as a concerned and approachable politician and African Americans' continuing frustration with racism.

Dear President Roosevelt:

I really don't know exactly how to begin this letter to you. Perhaps I should first tell you who I am. I am a young married woman. I am a Negro. . . . I believe that you are familiar with the labor situation among the Negroes, but I want you to know how I and many of us feel about it and what we expect of you.

My husband is working for the W.P.A. doing skilled labor. Before he started on this we were on relief for three months. We were three months trying to get relief. While trying to obtain relief I lost my unborn child. I believe if I had sufficient food this would not have happened. My husband was perfectly willing to work but could not find it. Now I am pregnant again. He is working at Tilden Tech. School where there are more white than colored. Every month more than one hundred persons are given private employment and not one of them are colored. It isn't that the colored men are not as skilled as the white, it is the fact that they are black and therefore must not get ahead.

We are citizens just as much or more than the majority of this country. . . . We are just as intelligent as they. This is supposed to be a free country regardless of color, creed or race but still we are slaves. . . . Won't you help us? I'm sure you can. I admire you and have very much confidence in you. I believe you are a real Christian and non-prejudiced. I have never doubted that you would be elected again. I believe you can and must do something about the labor conditions of the Negro.

Why must our men fight and die for their country when it won't even give them a job that they are fitted for? They would much rather fight and die for their families or race. Before it is over many of them might. We did not ask to be brought here as slaves, nor did we ask to be born black. We are real citizens of this land and must and will be recognized as such! . . . If you are a real Christian you can not stand by and let these conditions exist.

My husband is young, intelligent and very depressed over this situation. We want to live,

not merely exist from day to day, but to live as you or any human being desires to do. We want our unborn children to have an equal chance as the white. We don't want them to suffer as we are doing now because of race prejudice. My husband is 22 and I am 18 years of age. We want to own just a comfortable home by the time he reaches his early thirties. Is that asking too much? But how can we do that when the \$26 he makes every two weeks don't hardly last the two weeks it should. I can manage money rather well but still we don't have the sufficient amount of food or clothes to keep us warm. . . . I would appreciate it very much if you would give this letter some consideration and give me an answer. I realize that you are a very busy person and have many problems but please give this problem a little thought also.

I will close thanking you in advance.

Sincerely and hopefully yours

Mrs. Henry Weddington

Document Analysis

What were Weddington's primary concerns, as expressed in this letter?

What did Weddington expect Roosevelt to do?

Would you consider writing such a personal letter to the president today? Why or why not? If so, what would you say?