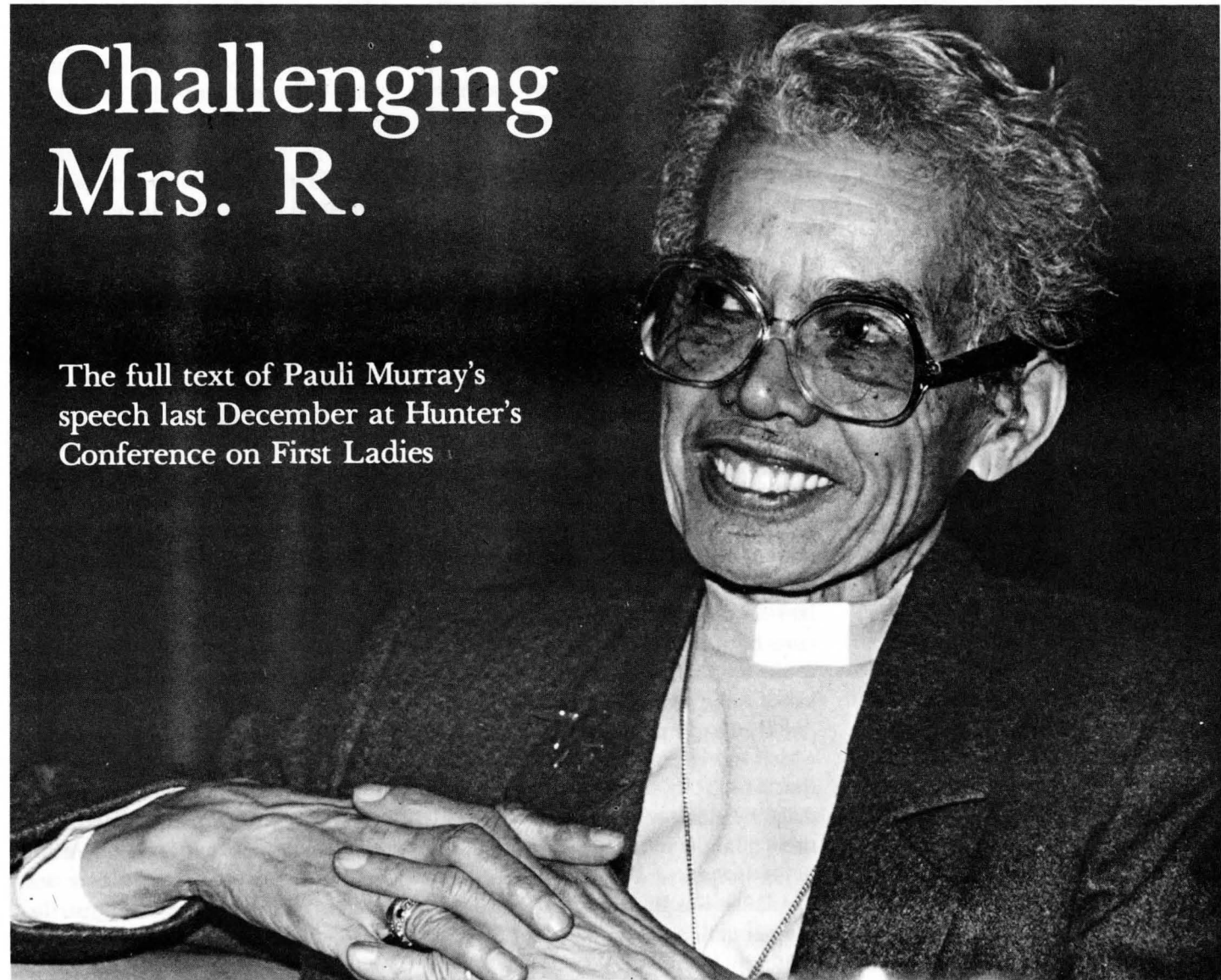


Challenging Mrs. R.

The full text of Pauli Murray's
speech last December at Hunter's
Conference on First Ladies



Janet Charles

Pauli Murray ('33) is now an Episcopal priest in the city of her birth, Baltimore. She has also had full-time careers as lawyer, professor of political science and American Studies, advocate of human rights, and author (Dark Testament and Other Poems and the memorable Proud Shoes, now in its second edition). She holds honorary degrees from, among others, Dartmouth, Radcliffe, Yale, and the Virginia Theological Seminary; is a member of the advisory council to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Institute for Non-Violent Change and NOW, and has served the public good from as far away as Ghana and as close to home as Hunter College, where she is a member of its Hall of Fame and recipient of its Award for Outstanding Professional Achievement.

Like many people here today, I am a survivor of the Great Depression. And as I read the *New York Times* this morning and looked at the statistics on rising unemployment, I thought that Mrs. Roosevelt would feel right at home because, in a sense, today's economic climate is almost identical to the climate of 1932 and early 1933.

I am a direct beneficiary of New Deal policies. I am a beneficiary of Mrs. Roosevelt's initiative in setting up unemployed women's camps as a kind of counterpart to the CCC camps for boys. After I graduated from Hunter

College in January 1933, just days before the bank holiday and days before the Roosevelts took office, my personal physician discovered that I had some sort of shadow on my lung, and but for the fact that I was able to go to Camp TERA, one of the camps for unemployed women in New York State, I might have developed tuberculosis and would not have been here today. Also, but for Mrs. Roosevelt's initiative with Hilda Smith, in setting up the Works Progress Administration's Workers Education Project, I might not have had an opportunity to grow and develop as a teacher of current

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events, economic development, and the kinds of subject matter which ultimately nudged me toward the field of law. So that, despite what I am about to say, I pay tribute to the New Deal, FDR, and Eleanor, for helping to shape my life and bringing me where I am today. But —

For many of the twenty-two years that I knew Mrs. Roosevelt, my role was that of youthful challenger and critic, and my feelings toward her were often ambivalent, ranging from wariness to near-adoration. Born in the era which the late Dr. Rayford Logan, historian, characterized as the "nadir" of Negro life in the United States and brought up in North Carolina, a state of the old Confederacy, the word "Democrat" as a political party was anathema to me. In 1932, I cast my first vote for Norman Thomas as a protest against both major parties. During the next three presidential elections I did not vote for FDR because of his failure to speak out publicly in favor of anti-lynching legislation, the foremost civil rights issue of the 1930's and early 1940's. I didn't vote against him either; I simply did not vote.

For me, becoming friends with Mrs. Roosevelt was a slow, painful process, marked by sharp exchanges of correspondence, often anger on my side and exasperation on her side, and a

gradual development of mutual admiration and respect. On the one hand, Mrs. Roosevelt was a mother figure to me; she and FDR were of the same generation as my own parents; they were also Episcopalians; they had had six children as did my own parents, born roughly in the same period as the six Murray children (I was born in the same year as Elliott Roosevelt); and they had a graciousness of spirit to which my own family aspired. I felt that Mrs. Roosevelt was a woman of deep religious commitment. And all these qualities made me feel very close to her in spite of myself. On the other hand, she was the wife of a President whose political pragmatism ran counter to my intense idealism. He was far too friendly with the Southern Democrats of that era to win my allegiance. He was a man who could accept an honorary degree from the University of North Carolina and hail it as a great liberal institution of learning, in his words: "thinking and acting in terms of today and tomorrow, and not in the tradition of yesterday." And he could say, "I am happy and proud to become an alumnus of the University of North Carolina, typifying as it does American liberal thought through American action," all this in the very same month that the University of North Carolina rejected my application for admission to graduate school solely because of my race.

The result of my rebellion was that Mrs. Roosevelt thought of me as "a firebrand" who had done some "foolish things" and who should not "push too fast," while I took it upon myself to challenge her behavior in the area of race relations as an important figure and a part of an Administration which was moving too slow. My first "confrontation by typewriter" with Mrs. Roosevelt came in January 1940, when she reported in her daily column, "My Day," that as a prominent member of the Newspaper Women's Club, she had attended their annual benefit performance at the Keith Theater in Washington to see the premiere showing of the movie *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, with Raymond Massey in the title role. She had crossed a picket line organized by the Washington Civil Rights Committee to protest the exclusion of Negroes from the theater. Her column reflected her uneasiness over her action. She didn't think it quite fair to picket a benefit performance for a charitable purpose, yet she wrote, "Though this was not a strike where any question of unfair labor conditions was involved, still I could not help feeling that there was another question here of unjust discrimination, and it made me unhappy."

Instead of being glad that she had called attention to unjust discrimination, I was stung over her attempt to justify crossing the picket line, and fired off a letter expressing my disappointment over the article "in which you admitted that you crossed a picket line against your deeper feelings. In the same article you stated, 'There comes a time . . . when one must stand up and be counted for the things in which one believes. It happens sooner or later to every one!' I have not been able to reconcile these two statements in my own thinking," I told Mrs. Roosevelt.

I went on: "The very nature of the sponsoring organization made that

picket line both fair and doubly significant. The Newspaper Women's Club represented the press, the most vital contact with public consciousness. Your article, even though it reflected some indecision, was a most effective result of that demonstration. Sympathetic editorial writers have done yeoman service in building public sentiment for the rights of labor. The rights of minority groups are equally important. There can be no compromise with the principle of equality."

Mrs. Roosevelt served as the lightning rod for my anger during her years in the White House. My highly critical attitude toward FDR's handling of the Negro question led me into a bruising dialogue with the First Lady in the summer of 1942. By then our relationship had progressed far enough for me to send her letters addressed to FDR and ask her to pass them on to him. In one of those letters I wrote with unconcealed sarcasm, "If the Japanese Americans can be evacuated from the West Coast to prevent violence being perpetrated upon them by our less disciplined American citizens, then certainly you have the power to evacuate Negro citizens from 'lynching' areas in the South, and particularly the poll tax states." I must have touched a raw nerve because Mrs. Roosevelt's stinging reply above her own signature crackled like a

whip. Among other things, she told me, "For one who must really have a knowledge of the workings of our government, your letter seems to be one of the most thoughtless I have ever read."

I didn't back down. Instead, I wrote her a five-page single-paged letter, in which I said in part, "You have been utterly frank with me, and I shall be equally frank with you. Until you clarified your position in your letter of August 3rd, I have shared the doubt of many Negroes as to your activities. We have often wondered whether you were acting independently, or whether you were launching trial balloons or making apologies for the White House." And then I documented a long list of incidents of intolerable insult to the dignity of Negro citizens during World War II and concluded, "Viewing these stupidities, I wonder whether the white man has the courage and the imagination to save himself and civilization from utter ruin. Three hundred years of oppression have given us patience to bear hardship, but I doubt whether it has given us patience to bear with the instruments of oppression. Though the issue may be freedom and not race, as you say, nevertheless Hitler is taking advantage of our inability to handle our minority question intelligently and still counts up victories while we 'muddle along.'" By way of parenthesis, I might say that Mrs. Roosevelt decided

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she better not answer that letter in writing. She sent me a telegram and it was really a command performance. It said in effect: the kinds of issues that have been discussed in your letter can best be discussed person to person. Therefore, Mrs. Roosevelt requests your presence on such and such a day at such and such a time. By which time I became terrified. I knew that if I got anywhere within Mrs. Roosevelt's aura, she could get anything she wanted out of me. So I asked her if I could bring along Ann Arnold Hedge-man, a somewhat older, more mature, seasoned politician. And Ann's assessment of that meeting with Mrs. Roosevelt was: "Pauli, you threw the dynamite, while I threw the sand."

Out of such candor with one another, an enduring friendship of respect and affection grew. Early in our relationship, we found common ground in our status as women, and it was in this area that we were able to transcend our political differences on racial strategies. The net impact of this great woman upon my life was that I learned by watching her in action over a period of three decades that each of us is culture-bound by the era in which we live, and that the greatest challenge to the individual is to try to move to the very boundaries of our historical limitations and to project ourselves toward future centuries. Mrs. Roosevelt, a product of late nineteenth century Victorianism, did just that, and she moved far beyond many of her contemporaries. I like to think that I am one of the younger women of her time, touched by her spirit of commitment to the universal dignity of the human being created in the image of God (which we theologians call *imago dei*). Hopefully, we have picked up the candle, or perhaps the fragments of the candle, that she lighted in the darkness and we are trying to carry it forward to the close of our own lives.