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Poor Franklin, poor Eleanor
By Lawrence J. Haas

What would President Roosevelt, the driving force behind what became the United Nations, and his wife Eleanor, the architect of its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, think of what the world is now making of their handiwork?

In Orwellian fashion, the United Nations has become its own worst enemy, an obstacle to its professed ends and an apologist for those who would upset the peace and abuse the rights of millions around the world. It is not just a disgusting spectacle, but also a testament to cowardice and moral confusion.

At Turtle Bay in recent days, the global community has allowed, in fact encouraged, the Islamic Republic of Iran to mock the principles and dampen the promise upon which this once-esteemed institution was founded.

Some 70 years ago, even before the United States joined the Allies' struggle against the Axis powers, FDR was envisioning a post-war body that would maintain peace while protecting human rights and promoting social and economic progress. In his "Four Freedoms" speech of early 1941 and his Atlantic Charter with Churchill later that year, he outlined the principles that guided his thinking.

So, what would he make of this week's spectacle – with the United Nations ceding its stage to the Holocaust-denying, genocide-threatening, nuclear weapons-seeking, human rights-abusing Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; with a hate-filled Ahmadinejad denying Tehran's obvious nuclear ambitions and seeking to blame the United States and Israel for all the world's wars and instability?

That Ahmadinejad would take the stage at a United Nations conference to review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – at the very time Tehran is mocking that treaty with its nuclear pursuit – and that he would pledge Iran's support for a worldwide end to nuclear weapons research and development, is all the more embarrassing.

What would FDR think? What about Churchill, who unhesitatingly, unapologetically called Hitler "the Nazi beast?" What would they think of a global body that legitimizes a man with Hitlerian ambitions?

And what of Eleanor? At President Truman's urging, she served on the first U.S. delegation to the United Nations and, through that appointment, spearheaded the process that produced the first and most important human rights document of global reach.

That document, calling on nations to respect human rights, has proved surprisingly influential. As Mary Ann Glendon writes in *A World Made New*, her history of the document and Eleanor's

role in bringing it to fruition, “the Declaration provided a rallying point for the freedom movements that spurred the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the demise of apartheid.” Since then, it has remained “the parent document, the primary inspiration, for most rights instruments in the world today.

What would Eleanor make of Iran’s election last week to a seat on the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women (a body “dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women”), courtesy of action by the UN’s Economic and Social Council? Would she not turn away in horror?

Would she not wonder why the United States – the world’s beacon of human rights and a nation that has probably done more to advance women’s rights than any in history – reportedly did not utter an objection?

That Iran could serve on such a commission mocks the goal to which this panel is supposedly dedicated. For when it comes to women’s rights, the clerical regime in Tehran is a veritable horror show.

Iran punishes adulterous women by stoning them to death. A woman is buried up to her waist, her head is covered with a white sheet, and stones are thrown at her until white turns to red and her body succumbs.

In Iran, spousal rape is not illegal, a woman’s rape allegations require confirmation by four male witnesses or by three males and two females, and a false accusation of rape is punishable by 80 lashes, according to the State Department. The testimony of two women equals that of one man, and a woman faces huge obstacles to divorce that a man does not.

Of late, Tehran has cracked down on women seeking greater gender equality under the law. It has arrested female activists who were then beaten, tortured, sexually assaulted, or raped while in prison.

In the days leading to Iran’s election to the women’s commission, two events occurred within the Islamic Republic that highlighted the sheer irony, the outright hypocrisy that surrounds this sorry episode.

A senior Iranian cleric proclaimed that women’s immodest dress causes not just male immorality and more adultery, but earthquakes as well. Also, Tehran’s police chief announced a crackdown on women who violate the nation’s dress code, such as “suntanned women and young girls who look like walking mannequins.”

What would Franklin and Eleanor think of a United Nations that honors Iran in the ways described above?

What should we?