



Helen Gahagan Douglas (1900-1980)

Decades before Ronald Reagan, stage star and California celebrity Helen Gahagan Douglas made the transition from acting to politics to become one of her party's standard-bearers. In an era when Cold War priorities often marginalized domestic reforms, Douglas became a beacon to New Deal liberals, who hoped to push economic and social legislation into the post-World War II period. Impatient with the institutional pace and intricacies of the House, Representative Douglas used her skills as an actress and her fame to speak passionately about topics ranging from equal rights for women to civil rights for African Americans and protections for the American worker.

Helen Gahagan was born in Boonton, New Jersey, on November 25, 1900. From 1922 to 1938, she pursued a career as an opera singer and an actress, starring in a variety of shows and plays. In a 1930 Broadway hit, *Tonight or Never*, Helen Gahagan met and costarred with her future husband, Melvyn Douglas. They married on April 5, 1931, and left New York City to relocate in Los Angeles as

Melvyn pursued a film career.

With international tensions on the rise, Helen Douglas set entertainment work aside and threw herself into public-service projects, becoming a member of the national advisory committee of the Works Progress Administration and a member of the California state committee of the National Youth Administration. She traveled frequently to the White House to meet with Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1940, she became a California Democratic national committeewoman—a post she held until 1944—serving as the vice chair of the California Democratic central committee and as head of the women's division. From 1942 to 1943, she was on the board of the California Housing and Planning Association.

In the 1944 general election, Douglas appealed to African-American voters in her urban district. Her platform called for equal rights, labor rights, food subsidies, unemployment insurance for returning GIs, a revitalized farm security program, and income-based taxation for farmers and small business owners. She also advocated international cooperation. Her candidacy drew attention to equality for women. When asked about a woman's place in Congress, Douglas replied, "Politics is a job that needs doing—by anyone who is interested enough to train for it and work at it. It is like housekeeping; someone has to do it. Whether the job is done by men or women is not important—only whether the job is done well or badly."

Douglas had little interest in mastering legislative processes, preferring instead to call attention to her agenda while using her celebrity to gain public exposure and awareness for specific programs. Her busy congressional schedule was complemented by an equally hectic speech-making itinerary around the country. Repeatedly during her congressional years, Douglas acted as a publicist for key liberal issues by making major speeches, both on and away from the House Floor, on issues ranging from postwar price controls to civil rights to the international regulation of atomic energy.

Douglas's sole committee assignment throughout her six years in the House reflected one of her many areas of focus: Foreign Affairs. She backed American participation in the United Nations, supported the implementation of the Bretton Woods Agreements, which created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and consistently challenged U.S. policy early in the Cold War. Douglas also supported Philippine independence and the creation of a Jewish state in Israel. President Harry S. Truman appointed her as an alternate U.S. Delegate to the United Nations Assembly.

Douglas's House career also drew from her devotion to domestic priorities, including the continuation of New Deal economic policies and the pursuit of civil rights reform. A vocal and consistent defender of labor and unions, Douglas vehemently opposed the Taft-Hartley Act. Officially known as the Labor-Management Relations Act, the bill encompassed a series of amendments to the New Deal-era National Labor Relations Act, weakening the power of organized labor. Among its most controversial provisions was an amendment requiring union leaders to sign loyalty oaths attesting that they were not Communist Party members. Douglas also was a major proponent of federal efforts to provide affordable housing for Americans in the postwar era, an issue central to her constituency in booming California.

During a period when the Jim Crow laws still applied in the nation's capital, Helen Douglas used her outsider status to challenge prevailing racial attitudes. The first white Representative with African Americans on her staff, she also sought to desegregate Capitol restaurants. Douglas also attacked the practice of poll taxes, which effectively prevented many southern African Americans from voting, and she urged passage of antilynching legislation.

Douglas retired to private life as a lecturer and a successful author. She later returned to the theater and performed in two Broadway plays. In 1964 she was again in the political spotlight when President Lyndon Johnson appointed her as the Special Ambassador to head the United States delegation to the inauguration ceremonies for President William V.S. Tubman of Liberia. She also authored a book based on her close friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt. She resided in New York City, succumbing to cancer on June 28, 1980.