

## Q & A with Christopher C. Gorham, author of **THE CONFIDANTE**

- **What led you Anna Rosenberg's story?**

*After seeing a black and white photo of her sharing a laugh with President Harry Truman, I wanted to know more. Who was this woman, who was close to both FDR and Truman, and who became Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Korean War? Finding no books on her, I took some students with me to Harvard to review her papers. We were blown away: the boxes were full of hand-written letters from FDR, Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, General Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson. It was like a rollcall of modern American history. I was hooked.*

- **What were some of the more surprising aspects of Rosenberg's life that you discovered as you were researching her?**

*How plugged in she was even as a young woman making her way in 1920s New York City. She was mentored by a tough Tammany Hall politician and by Belle Moskowitz, the key advisor to NY Governor Al Smith. Anna learned how to be tough when called for, but also how to be the power behind the throne.*

- **How did Anna Rosenberg help bring about U.S. victory in WWII?**

*Churchill and Roosevelt both knew that WWII was going to be won as much by war production as on the battlefield. That's where Anna came in, solving multiple labor problems here at home. In 1941 she helped convince FDR to take action to ensure the hiring of Black Americans in defense industries. Afterwards she developed the "Buffalo Plan" which streamlined how labor would be used to build the ships, tanks, and planes needed to defeat Germany and Japan. Her plan became the nationwide model—and really allowed the Arsenal of Democracy to fire at full blast.*

- **How did your background and law and history help you shape her story?**

*I needed both skillsets! To write history, says Jill Lepore, "is to make an argument by telling a story about dead people." Being a lawyer, I treated this like making an argument. Was there enough evidence to prove that Anna Rosenberg was deserving of a chapter in our national story? Happily, I found ample evidence. Then my lifelong love of good historical storytelling took over. I needed to prove my thesis by telling her story in all its richness.*

- **Where did she make the MOST impact in her long career?**

*That's really a tough question. Her work on Executive Order 8802 in the summer of 1941 was a major step in what became the modern Civil Rights movement . . . she also saw that the U.S. military was at last desegregated a decade later. Her influence on the educational direction of the G.I. Bill had a lasting impact on the American middle class. And thankfully we as a nation have followed her pioneering work to get the national government to support the War on Cancer and to invest in medical research. That is the expectation now, but before Anna, there*

was virtually no federal budget to fight deadly diseases. They just didn't talk about that then. So, in three areas, she made an enduring impact.

- **How did Rosenberg help guide the direction of the G.I. Bill?**

People don't realize this, but Roosevelt and Congress hadn't really thought through the details of the G.I. Bill. It was, quite literally, drawn up on a napkin—all they really knew is they wanted to do *something* for veterans that was more than what was given to WWI vets--\$60 and a train ride home. Just months after D-Day in 1944, Anna crossed France with General Patton's men and learned a surprising thing: they wanted a chance at an education. Not so much a job, or job training, these men wanted to better themselves. When Anna told FDR this, he "lit up." They wanted a chance to participate in the success of the nation they helped save. And when the details of the G.I. Bill were filled in, the thrust was higher education.

- **What was it about her that allowed Anna Rosenberg to succeed for so long in such male-dominated fields?**

As her grandson told me, Anna knew how to get herself into the halls of power and how to stay there. She was not only the confidante to FDR, but was the top woman in Truman's administration, a pivotal figure in Eisenhower's career, and LBJ's. Nelson Rockefeller, former Vice President of the United States, said, "everything I amounted to in Washington I owe to Anna Rosenberg." She could gossip with FDR but keep his secrets. She was a witty conversationalist, and a patient listener. An "Honorary Man" in the words of one scholar, and "one of the girls." Just an extraordinary combination of discretion and social grace.

- **Why has her remarkable story been forgotten for so long?**

Multiple reasons. When Eleanor Roosevelt tried to put her in touch with a biographer, she refused. Same with NY publishing houses, who all wanted her story. Her discretion was why she demurred. What those presidents had told her, they had told her in confidence, and she wouldn't betray that. Additionally, there is no college or university to claim her and keep her flame. Hers was so often a soft power, behind-the-scenes. Historians found that difficult to evaluate—especially when others were putting themselves at the center of the story.

- **Why is her story important today?**

Anna understood so clearly that democracy requires ongoing work. Democracy is never a done thing, it's a doing thing. Greater social equality for women and Black Americans would strengthen democracy. Mutual respect between management and labor would strengthen democracy. A vibrant middle-class would strengthen democracy. More women in positions of power would strengthen our democracy. A willingness to take on bullies and demagogues would strengthen our democracy, as would a commitment to decency and a sense of patriotism, rather than nationalism. We all need Anna's inspiration if we are to fight against the enemies—abroad and home-grown—who seek to weaken the American Eagle in order to, in FDR's words, "feather their own nests."