“Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?”

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Women, it rests with us. We have got to bring to the President, individually, day by day, week in and week out, the idea that great numbers of women want to be free, will be free, and want to know what he is going to do about it.
- Harriot Stanton Blatch, 1917

An important chapter in American history is the climax of the battle for woman suffrage. In 1917, members of the National Woman’s Party escalated their efforts from lobbying to civil disobedience. These brave women aimed their protests at President Woodrow Wilson, picketing the White House as “Silent Sentinels” and displaying statements from Wilson’s speeches to show his hypocrisy in not supporting suffrage. The public’s attention was aroused by the arrest and detention of these women. This reaction was strengthened by the mistreatment of the women in jail, particularly their force-feeding. In 1917, when confronted by the tragedy of the jailed suffragists, prominent political figures and the broader public recognized Wilson’s untenable position that democracy could exist without national suffrage. The suffragists triumphed when Wilson changed his stance and announced his support for the federal suffrage amendment.

The struggle for American woman suffrage began in 1848 when the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The movement succeeded in securing suffrage for four states, but slipped into the so-called “doldrums” period (1896-1910) during which no states adopted suffrage. After the Civil War, the earlier suffrage groups merged into the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), but their original aggressiveness waned.

Meanwhile, in Britain, militant feminism had appeared. Americans Alice Paul and Lucy Burns were students in Britain during the militant suffrage movement led by Emmeline Pankhurst. Starting in 1907, Paul and Burns participated in controversial public protests and prison hunger-strikes initiated by Pankhurst and her two daughters; they were arrested on
numerous occasions. The two later returned to the United States and joined NAWSA in 1912. Compared to the British suffragists, NAWSA was far more conventional and was cautious of tactics that would appear un-ladylike. Paul’s and Burns’ militancy clashed with NAWSA’s conservatism, so they eventually formed a smaller group called the National Woman’s Party (NWP) to pursue their radical tactics.

In March 1913, the American movement was energized when Paul and Burns staged a suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. with NAWSA’s cautious approval. Inez Milholland, a charismatic lawyer and civil rights activist, led the 8,000 women. Some of whom carried banners demanding a suffrage amendment. The parade attracted a mob that attacked the women, which generated favorable publicity for the cause.

Paul believed that the quickest path to nationwide suffrage was through a constitutional amendment. She disagreed with NAWSA’s leaders, including Carrie Chapman Catt, who remained willing to work for suffrage state-by-state. NAWSA succeeded in restarting progress on suffrage at the state level, and by 1912 there were ten states with full suffrage. However, this method was too costly and time consuming relative to the results it produced. For example, in 1912, a suffrage referendum failed in Wisconsin by a vote of 227,024 to 135,546. In April 1913, Paul formed the independent Congressional Union (CU) to lobby for a federal amendment. NAWSA regarded the CU as competition, so, in 1914, Paul and Burns were expelled from NAWSA.

Paul further believed that presidential support was necessary to press Congress for passage of the amendment. She argued that the best way to influence both the President and Congress was, according to Burns, to “ask from the party in power in Congress [the Democrats] the passage of a constitutional amendment enfranchising women, and to hold that party

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responsible for its answer.” Wilson, consistent with the Democratic Party platform, regarded suffrage as a states’ rights issue. The CU, therefore, campaigned against the Democrats in 1914 and 1916. Paul formed the NWP in 1916 to influence women in the western suffrage states, which made up 17% of the electoral votes. This strategy failed as Wilson was reelected. The CU merged with the NWP to consolidate their efforts.

In the fall of 1916, despite Inez Milholland’s doctor’s objections, Paul convinced Milholland to join a western speaking tour because her powerful image at the front of the 1913 parade had made her a suffrage icon. In the middle of one speech, Milholland declared, “Mr. President, how long must women wait for Liberty?” and immediately fainted. She died ten weeks later, becoming the first American martyr for woman suffrage. The suffragists honored her “triumphant death” and appealed to America, “to finish the task she could not finish.”

Wilson agreed to receive a resolution drafted by the NWP in Milholland’s honor. On January 9, 1917, surprised by the size of the delegation, he angrily dismissed their request for his support of the federal amendment, saying, “…it is so impossible for me until the orders of my party are changed, to do anything other than [what] I am doing” and walked out of the meeting. Despite this, the NWP continued to regard his support as crucial, as demonstrated in a January letter from Anne Martin, the NWP Legislative Chairman, to Ada James, the NWP Wisconsin State Chairman:

At present we have about two-thirds of the Republicans and less than one-third of the Democrats in favor. Only the President’s support will give us enough additional Democratic votes to secure the passage of the amendment.

The NWP moved its campaign in a new direction: civil disobedience. They engaged in daily picketing, displaying defiant messages as the “silent sentinels [whose] purpose [was] to make it impossible for the President to enter or leave the White House without encountering a
As described in the *Boston Journal*, “Their voices were drowned out, [so] they found it necessary to appeal to the eye.” At this point real suffrage militancy began. Daily picketing commenced on January 10; twelve women stood at the White House bearing banners with messages such as, “Mr. President, What Will You Do For Woman Suffrage?” Both Wilson and the police stationed at the White House gates were polite to the pickets, who maintained their daily vigil for months without harassment.

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. entered World War I. Wilson assumed the role of an international champion of democracy in justifying the U.S. intervention. The war placed the NWP in an awkward position, but the suffragists resolved to continue picketing. During the Civil War, suffrage organizations had put their cause aside to contribute to the war effort. Paul felt that this had derailed the early suffrage movement and did not wish for this to happen again.

The pickets’ banners communicated the inconsistency between Wilson’s fight for democracy abroad while refusing to grant the same at home. To the public and press, the pickets seemed “unpatriotic, almost treasonable.” NAWSA also disapproved. While they were heckled, there was no initial violence.

The militants escalated their campaign on June 20, 1917, when they displayed the controversial “Russia” banner, which read: “To The Russian Envoys, We The Women Of America Tell You That America Is Not A Democracy. Twenty Million American Women Are Denied The Right To Vote. President Wilson Is The Chief Opponent Of Their National Enfranchisement.” Russia’s February Revolution had led to the establishment of a republic, one of whose first acts was to implement universal woman suffrage. The banner enraged passersby and violence ensued. The police did not protect the women. Wilson complained to his
daughter, Jessie Wilson, that the women were “bent upon making their cause as obnoxious as possible.”

The next day, District of Columbia Chief of Police, Major Pullman informed the NWP that should the pickets continue, they would be arrested; even though picketing in the District of Columbia was legal under the 1914 Clayton Act. On June 22, Lucy Burns and Katherine Morey were arrested under the pretense of “traffic obstruction.” They were subsequently released without a trial. Historian Sally Graham writes, “The photographs of the two women, surrounded by a mob of rowdies, cast doubt on the validity of both the charges and the arrests…the subsequent publicity disturbed the administration greatly.”

Picketing continued through June and July with frequent arrests that resulted in either a $25 fine or jail time of up to sixty days in the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. The arrested women refused to pay, claiming, “[It] would be an admission of guilt.” The women thus found themselves confined to a workhouse with poor ventilation, worm-infested food, and unwashed blankets.

Violence flared again on August 14, when the pickets carried the provocative “Kaiser” banner, which read: “Kaiser Wilson. Have You Forgotten How You Sympathized With The Poor Germans Because They Were Not Self-Governed? 20,000,000 American Women Are Not Self-Governed.” The comparison of Wilson with the German Monarch Wilhelm II was particularly offensive to onlookers. The banners were torn down and the pickets were beaten. The women retreated to their headquarters as the angry mob followed them and fired shots at their building.

Reactions to the more defiant protests were mixed. Some NWP members feared that the controversial protests would cause membership to decrease. Yet, public sympathy for the suffragists was also evident. Doris Stevens, one of the one hundred sixty-eight women arrested
during the protests, wrote in her memoir, “The press printed headlines which could not but
arouse the sympathies of thousands … from coast to coast there poured in at our headquarters
copies of telegrams sent to Administration leaders.”31 The Richmond Evening Journal reported,
“The ravaged banners, rendered by Washington’s pagan mob, shall serve to arouse the nation of
its incongruous attitude towards its own women, while praising England and Russia for [their]
steps to accord equal justice in both sexes.”32

In this period, several significant political figures approached Wilson and tried to
persuade him to support the amendment. J. A. H. Hopkins, a New Jersey Progressive Party
leader and an avid Wilson supporter during his term as New Jersey Governor, protested his
wife’s imprisonment during a demonstration in July 1917. Hopkins told Wilson, “the solution lay
in … immediate passage”33 Minnesota Congressman C.L. Lindberg was disturbed to witness the
mob violence during the Kaiser banner riots and urged Wilson to support the amendment.34 In
September 1917, a close personal friend of Wilson, Dudley Field Malone, resigned his position
as Collector of the Port of New York because of his objections to how Wilson dealt with the
jailed suffragists.35

Picketing continued into the fall. In early November 1917, after being arrested and
sentenced to seven months in the District Jail (to isolate her from the Occoquan suffragists), Paul
decided to use “the ultimate protest weapon” – a hunger-strike.36 She was placed in solitary
confine ment in a psychiatric ward and on November 8, doctors began force-feeding Paul.37

Mistreatment of the suffragists increased. On November 15, 1917, Burns and other
suffragists were sent to the Occoquan Workhouse. They requested political prisoner status and
were subsequently abused. Mary Nolan, one of the women present, described what would later
be called “The Night of Terror”: 
… they pushed me through a door. Then I lost my balance and fell against the iron bed. Mrs. Cosu struck the wall… We had lain there for a few minutes when Mrs. Lewis was literally thrown in. Her head struck the iron bed. We thought she was dead… Mrs. Lewis was not unconscious, she was only stunned. But Mrs. Cosu was desperately ill as the night wore on. She had a bad heart attack and was vomiting. We called and called… The guards paid no attention.38

News of Paul’s hunger-strike spread to Occoquan and other suffragists began to refuse food as well, despite the threat of excruciatingly painful thrice-daily naso-gastric force feeding. Burns described the experience:

[I] was stretched on a bed … I was held down by five people at legs, arms, and head. I refused to open mouth. Gannon pushed tube up left nostril. I turned and twisted my head all I could but he managed to push it up. It hurts nose and throat very much and makes nose bleed freely. Tube drawn out covered with blood. Operation leaves one very sick.39

On November 18, lawyers for the incarcerated suffragists in Occoquan obtained a writ of habeas corpus alleging cruelties dealt to them during the “Night of Terror.” The petition sought the release of all Occoquan prisoners on the grounds that their incarceration outside the District of Columbia was illegal.40 On November 23, when the women appeared in court, spectators saw a disturbing scene: “the slender file of women, haggard, red-eyed, sick, came into the bar. Some were able to walk to their seats, [while] others were so weak that they had to be stretched out on the wooden benches.”41 Judge Edmund Waddill ruled that their incarceration in Occoquan had been illegal. He transferred them to the District Jail to complete their sentences; the hunger-strike continued.

The condition of the hunger-strikers was widely reported by the press. At this point, Wilson realized his position could not be continued. According to his wife, Edith Wilson, Wilson said of the hunger-strikers, “…they must not be made martyrs.”42 Desperate to prevent any
deaths, on November 28, Wilson sent journalist David Lawrence to inform Paul that Wilson would publicly endorse the amendment.

On November 29, the hunger-strikers were released and Paul declared that, “The commutation of sentences acknowledges them to be unjust and arbitrary. The attempt to suppress legitimate propaganda has failed. We hope that no more demonstrations will be necessary, that the amendment will move steadily on to passage and ratification without further suffering or sacrifice. But what we do depends entirely upon what the Administration does.”

On January 10, 1918, President Wilson formally announced his support of the federal suffrage amendment. The next day, the House passed the amendment 274 to 136, meeting the necessary two-thirds majority. As evidence that Wilson’s endorsement was crucial, just one month earlier the NWP determined that only 243 representatives supported the amendment.

Another two years were needed for the amendment to clear all Congressional barriers and to be ratified by three-fourths of the states. During this time, the NWP continued its campaign, literally keeping a fire burning outside the White House as a constant reminder of their cause. Wilson personally lobbied for the amendment when it faced difficulties in the Senate in 1918 and 1919 (the Senate passed it on June 4, 1919). On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The amendment’s effect on politics was immediate. On November 2, 1920, 27 million women across the U.S. voted in the presidential election.

In an America where women represented 53.6% of voters in the 2004 general election, it is easy to forget how remarkable this would have been to someone alive when Alice Paul began her battle for American suffrage in 1912. This triumph for American women came at tragic costs
for the small group of women who challenged Wilson by forcing him to realize his indefensible position of fighting for democracy abroad while rejecting equal rights for women at home.


4 Ford 22


9 Ibid., 658, 661.

10 J.W. McMullin, “Brief Legislative History of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement in Wisconsin” [photostat], September 1915, Madison, Wisconsin; original in Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, 2.


16 Ford, *Iron-Jawed Angels*, 76

17 Quoted in Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom*, 57.


22 Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom*, 76.

23 Ibid., 92.


28 Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom*, 76.

29 Ibid., 230-234.

30 Ford, *Iron Jawed Angels*, 128


36 Ibid., 184.


39 Ibid., 201.

40 *New York Times*, November 17, 1917.


Appendix

Figure 1: Inez Milholland leads the 1913 suffrage parade.

Figure 2: NWP members picket outside the White House in 1917 with the message, “Mr. President, How long must women wait for Liberty” Source: *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4: Suffragist, Virginia Arnold holds the “Kaiser” banner in August 1917. Source: Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman’s Party, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Figure 5: An actual copy of the 19th Amendment of 1920.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


This book provided me with the common objections to suffrage that were brought up during meetings NAWSA had with government officials.


This source provided me with my beginning quote.


Available from http://www.historicaldocuments.com/19thAmendment.htm; Internet.

This internet archive provided me with a copy of the Nineteenth Amendment.


This collection of letters to and from Ada James, the Wisconsin representative of the NWP, included directives from the NWP headquarters.


Wilson’s papers included correspondence with his daughter, Jessie Wilson.
McMullin, J.W., “Brief Legislative History of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement in Wisconsin” [Photostat], September 1915, Madison, Wisconsin; original in Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

This pamphlet provided me with a timeline on Suffrage in Wisconsin. It also provided me with the statistics on the 1912 referendum vote. This document was compiled with the assistance of Ada James.


Several articles from The New York Times provided information on Milholland’s death, force-feeding of Alice Paul, the writ of habeas corpus, and Paul’s statement after her release from the District Jail.


This source provided me with many of the quotes I used. It had excerpts and quotes from many other suffragists as well, including words in their defense, the process of force-feeding, and what happened on the “Night of Terror”.


This Article detailed the plan and reasons for the protests of the “Silent Sentinels”. The NWP (National Women’s Party) put forth $3,000 to create banners and pickets for the “Silent Sentinels” to hold outside the white house so that President Woodrow Wilson could not leave or enter the White House without seeing a plea for suffrage.

This source gave me an idea of what Wilson was thinking during the movement. He confided in her many useful thoughts and quotes.


*The Suffragist*, the NWP’s newspaper provided excellent information on the NWP movement, including quotes from the *Boston Journal* and the *Richmond Evening Journal* and a photograph used in the Appendix.


This photographic archive provided several suffragist photographs for the Appendix.

**Secondary Sources**


This source was the first book I read on my topic and it provided me with an overview of the overall movement to grant women the right to vote while focusing in on NWP. It detailed the steps they took to bring them closer to their goal: the passing of the 19th Amendment.

This source provided me with the details on the reasons for and process of every step in Alice Paul’s militant movement. It also provided many useful quotes.


This source provided me with information on the midnight visit to Alice Paul by David Lawrence.


This source provided me with many quotes pertaining to my topic and quite a bit of information on the formation of various suffrage groups and the influences those who were close to Wilson had on him.


This source provided me with information about NAWSA’s opinion on the 1913 suffrage parade staged by Alice Paul.