

The Power of a Collective Voice



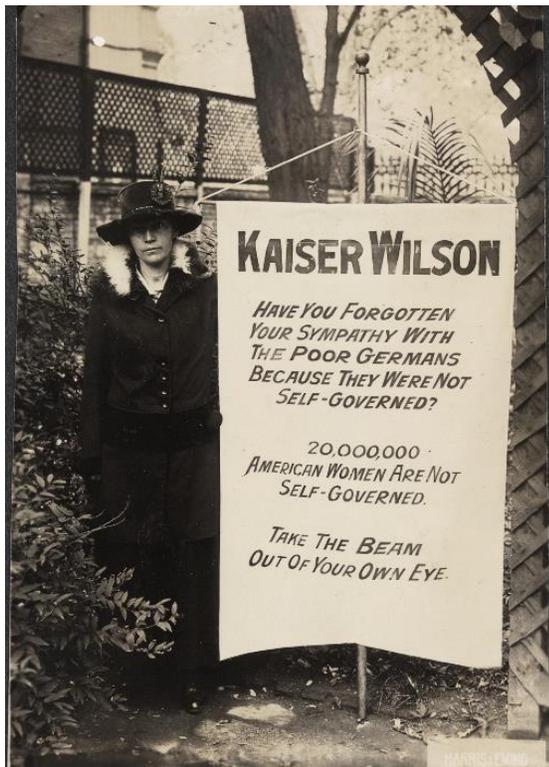
(1917) *The first picket line – College day in the picket line.* Washington D.C., 1917. Feb. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/97500299/>.

Forced feedings...Hunger strikes...Jailhouse brutality...Racism...Fractious organizations...These may not be the images we immediately conjure when we consider the suffrage movement in the United States. We may often think of the courage, the sense of near fearlessness, or perhaps the iconic images of women silently protesting in front of the White House, but even with the latter, there has often been a romanticized approach in discussions of the suffrage movement. Yes, women *were* courageous, and yes, they took on the *monumental* task of attempting to change a centuries-old societal assumption of women's rightful place. But the movement was often divided during its 72 years due to a power struggle between varying suffrage organizations; towards the final years of the movement, the two main organizations left standing, the National Woman's Party (NWP), the more agitation-intensive organization, and the National Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), which preferred a more traditional lobbying approach, made an effort to co-exist as they intensified their efforts to secure the right to vote.

Earlier this summer, on 4 June 2019, the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the passing of the "suffrage amendment" (the 19th Amendment) by Congress. Next year, on 18 August 2020, the United States will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the official ratification of the 19th Amendment. While this amendment resulted in the monumental achievement of the right to vote for women, its' application was not immediate for many women. Throughout the South, for example, many African

American women were continually denied the ability to vote until 1965 with the implementation of the Voting Rights Act.

I am fortunate to teach Purdue University Global's *American Women* course, and I often begin our suffrage movement discussions by asking my students what they know about the movement. Many mention Susan B. Anthony; others are aware of Alice Paul, and some are familiar with the protests in front of the White House in the final years of the movement, but fewer are familiar with the true underbelly of the movement – the power struggle; the division on the topic of racial equality; or the reality that many suffragists were mistreated after their often public arrests.



Harris & Ewing, W. (1917). *Virginia Arnold holding Kaiser Wilson banner*. United States, 1917. [Aug. ?] [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000220>

Their responses are not surprising. Elementary school children learn about Susan B. Anthony and her courage, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the primary author of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, but may not learn about Anthony's arrest in 1872. Even in my niece's recent high school AP US History course, while she discussed the vituperation many suffragists experienced in their increasingly public protests in the last decade or so of the movement, the class did not belabor those points, but rather, focused on the successful accomplishment of a 72-year endeavor. In my own learning

experiences prior to undergrad, the same was true; furthermore, there was little emphasis either on the racial divisions in the suffrage movement. This, too, is a critical aspect of the movement. African American women, required to create their own suffrage organizations in a Jim Crow era United States, were increasingly instrumental in the final decades of the suffrage movement (Dubois, E.C. & Dumenil, L., 2019). Frances Ellen Watkins, perhaps not as well-known as her contemporaries Ida Wells Barnett or Mary Church Terrell, commented in an 1866 speech, “We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity” (Ware, S., 2019).

Similarly, during a conversation this summer with my 17-year old nephew, he was shocked to learn Alice Paul, head of the NWP, was sentenced in October 1917 to seven months in Occoquan Workhouse, the prison soon to be known for the Night of Terror, November 14, 1917, when 33 women were brutally tortured because they had opted to peacefully and silently protest in front of the White House. These 33 women, members of the NWP, were part of the Silent Sentinels, women who quietly picketed in front of the White House, often holding signs such as “Mr. President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?” or others directed to the attention of “Kaiser Wilson”. Once the brutal beatings of November 14 became public knowledge, the women were released later that month, setting in motion a repeal of their conviction in early 1918, and pressure on Congress from President Wilson to pass the suffrage amendment (Pruitt, S., 2019).

As we approach the 100th anniversary next year of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, it is important to acknowledge that this was a 72-year *battle*, with the greatest intensity occurring in the last few decades of the movement. Women endured heartache and brutality, but they persevered; they took their fight from small churches and small speaking venues to the front of the White House and the Treasury building. They reflected changes occurring in the United States, a true depiction of women’s resilience and persistence.

References

Dubois, E. C. & Dumenil, L. (2019). *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Fifth edition). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins.

Pruitt, S. (2019). “The Night of Terror: When Suffragists Were Imprisoned and Tortured in 1917.” Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/news/night-terror-brutality-suffragists-19th-amendment>

Ware, S. (2019). “It’s time to return black women to the center of the history of women’s suffrage.” Retrieved from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/23/its-time-return-black-women-center-history-womens-suffrage/?noredirect=on>

Addendum:

Included below is a source which offers information on the current and upcoming centennial celebrations in Washington, DC:

“Ways to Commemorate the Women’s Suffrage Centennial in DC” (2019). Retrieved from <https://washington.org/visit-dc/womens-suffrage-centennial-events>

Author:

Jennifer Harrison
FT Faculty, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
School of General Education
Purdue University Global