

The First Female U.S. Congressperson: Jeannette Rankin

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As we look to the recent changes and firsts within the U.S. political arena in the twenty-first century, it is important to remember other individuals who stood out as pioneers in their respective time periods. Most Americans cannot name the first female US senator or congressional representative therefore this essay will examine the life of Jeannette Rankin.

Jeannette Rankin was definitely a woman who was steadfast in her ideas. She was always labeled a pacifist and a suffragette. Yet she had compassion for the veterans of war and she always said that men and women are like the left hand and the right hand—both are needed to promote progressive change in society. Though seemingly an idealist, she had a very pragmatic view of the world and her actions and words show that she was quite sympathetic to the needs of the working class and the cause of human rights in America. She was the Founding Vice President of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). She successfully promoted women's suffrage in Montana, several years before the passage of the right to vote became a federal, constitutional right for women. Her initial and vocal opposition to every major American military adventure (World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War) afforded her a leadership position when the country finally sided with her opposition to war in the Vietnam War period. She always seemed a little bit ahead of her time, yet wedded to causes that ultimately did gain traction in the American political scene.

While some newspapers portrayed her early political actions as those of a socialist radical, it is closer to the truth to say that most modern libertarians would be proud to claim her as one of their own. A true “Western Maverick” in her own way, it is difficult to really categorize this woman. Perhaps it was her exposure in the West to the Indians of Montana, the workers in the Anaconda cooper mines, or her college training in biology that point to a woman who really sensed the true commonalities of human beings, not as men or women, native or American. “Everyone wants freedom,” she said, and her travels to India, Turkey, South Africa, New Zealand and all parts of the United States seemed to enhance her basic creed that “international conflicts may be resolved by means other than war.” She would visit India several times and was keenly interested in the words and actions of Gandhi in resisting the imperialist zeal of the British and forging a national consciousness in such a religiously diverse setting.

The early years

She was born, Jeannette Pickering Rankin, on a ranch near Missoula, Montana on June 11, 1880. She was the oldest of seven siblings. Her mother, Olive Pickering, was an elementary school teacher. Her father, John Rankin was a successful rancher and lumber businessman. He passed away in 1904, shortly after Jeannette graduated from University of Montana in 1902 with her B.S. in Biology. This left her with more responsibility as the eldest sibling. As a child, she spent the first five years of her life on the ranch before moving with the family to Missoula, where she attended public school and her academic prowess blossomed. It is interesting to note that once she graduated from the University of Montana, she also started out as a school teacher, seemingly following in her mother's footsteps. But that was not to be her life's calling.

When Jeannette's father died she assumed the responsibility for five sisters and her brother, Wellington, to whom she grew very close and who aided her in many of her future political endeavors. She tried being a seamstress and learned furniture design. After college, for roughly eight years, she tended to her dying father, an ailing mother and siblings. She managed the family ranch in Grant Creek and the homestead in Missoula. On a trip to visit her brother at Harvard in 1904, she became aware of the squalid city slum conditions. As she traveled through Boston, New York, and Chicago she witnessed the stark contrast between the poverty of the urban slums and the wealth of the privileged few. She decided to throw herself into getting a second degree, this time in the field of social work. In 1908 Rankin left Montana and enrolled in the New York School of Philanthropy which is now the world-renowned Columbia University School of Social Work.

What can be made of the young Jeannette Rankin's life? Like so many women today she was busy balancing family and her wider interests in intellectual and professional leanings toward helping others. At the age of ten she became painfully aware of the massacre at Wounded Knee and she regretted the disappearance of friendly Indians that she had frequently seen in her early years around the homestead in Missoula. In a book by Norma Smith entitled *Jeannette Rankin: America's Conscience*, Rankin is quoted as she recounts her feeling about hearing of the frightening news that had spread from neighboring South Dakota: "As the Indians came out of their tents, the American soldiers shot them.... It was a most disgraceful act, the most outrageous thing that could happen. What Calley did at My Lai was nothing to what they did, the American army." (Smith, p. 55). One may discern that from the very outset of her life, Jeannette Rankin felt righteous indignation over the use of brute military force.

Political roots as a suffragette

Rankin briefly practiced as a social worker in Montana and Washington state. Feeling frustrated as a social worker, she decided to quit and become a college student again, this time she enrolls at the University of Washington. There, as a student, she became involved in the successful 1910 campaign in the state of Washington for women's suffrage. It was probably the satisfaction that she derived from her involvement in this political cause that led directly to her lifetime career in politics as an agent for progressive social change. When Rankin returned to Montana to visit her family that following Christmas, she learned that a suffrage amendment was going to be introduced in January, 1911 in to the Montana state legislature. She asked to address that body and became the first woman to address the Montana legislature. Although that measure did not pass, her eloquence as a public speaker was noticed and she found her voice had been heard on the national stage as she launched her political career in Montana by campaigning so diligently for the cause of women's suffrage. The national suffrage leaders noticed her, even though the Montana amendment had failed by a slim margin. She had made an impact, and this launched her career. For the next five years she went across the country campaigning for the suffrage movement. She became a field secretary for the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) as she campaigned in New York State, and California. Then she returned to Montana, spearheading a campaign where, this time around, she felt the joy of victory and gained notoriety around the state that would serve useful once she decided to run for Congress in 1916. There is a definite connection between Jeannette Rankin's background as a social worker and her ardent efforts toward women's suffrage. She knew in her heart that the social reforms that would make a difference in the lives of the women and children who were forced to endure the urban squalor she had seen would surely come about if women achieved the right to vote. Their voices would be heard and this would tilt the political balance in favor of removing the miserable conditions of the women and children she saw living in abject poverty. It was this moral compass that steered her to become a rising star of the national women's suffrage campaign. She enjoyed great recognition for her political organizing prowess within the suffrage movement. She had a flare for speech-making. The following is a quote which she was known for making often in lobbying the crowds: "It is beautiful and right that a woman should nurse her child through Typhoid Fever. But it is also beautiful and right that she should have a voice in regulating the milk supply from which the Typhoid resulted" (Giles, p. 60).

With the victory for women's suffrage in Montana behind her, she was inspired to see the rest of the world, and ventured to New Zealand, working her way there by using her skills as a seamstress on a

Pacific-Orient Express ship. She must have been inspired by the social climate of that country. Women had possessed the right to vote there since 1893, and this demonstrated the example of a democracy with progressive social reforms. New Zealand had pensions for the elderly, accompanied by survivors' benefits for women and their children. There was workman's compensation, labor arbitration and child labor laws. Wishing to push for such reforms in the United States, she returned to the States wishing to launch a political career. Her brother, Wellington, supported her ambitions. He became her campaign manager, and helped to finance her bid for one of two seats available in the U.S. Congressional race in Montana in 1916. She ran on a progressive Republican platform that called for national women's suffrage, child protection laws, and progressive labor legislation. Although a majority of the voters of Montana were Democrats, she won the election, and thus became the first woman to serve in a national legislature in any western democracy. It should be noted that a large part of Montana's economy thrived on mining operations, and her pro-labor stance there helped her obtain votes, even though the majority of the voters were Democrats. She became the first woman to serve in Congress in a nation where most women still had not even secured the right to vote.

First woman to serve in the U.S. Congress

Her first week in Washington D.C. Jeanette Rankin, known during her race by her constituents as a pacifist and coming from a part of the country which could be characterized as isolationist, was inescapably drawn into a national debate concerning the looming war in Europe. President Woodrow Wilson, calling for a vote on a resolution of war on Germany, afforded Jeanette Rankin her first opportunity to cast a vote in Congress. It is perhaps fitting that, in casting her first vote, she broke the tradition of stating a simple "Yay or "Nay" by saying: "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for War" (Giles, p. 94). It is undoubtedly true that Rankin was, as she later insisted, following the sentiments of her constituents in Montana. However, the rest of the nation was swept up in the war rhetoric and front page headlines of American merchant ships being sunk by German battleships. "Remember the Lusitania," is a popular, historical cry, recognized even today. Rankin was always careful to note to her critics that there were 55 other men who voted against the resolution that day, most of whom were not treated with the same cruelty as she was. In New York some of her speaking engagements were cancelled as a speaker in the women's suffragette movement. But the letters she received from fellow Montana residents were sixteen to one in support of her vote against the resolution of war (Smith, p.114). Nevertheless, she would be vilified by the press in Montana for her anti-war position.

During her term of office she did vote for several pro-war measures, such as the issuance of liberty bonds and she voted for the draft as she believed they would bring a quicker end to World War I. She was, nevertheless, ideologically opposed to the war in principle. She was quoted as saying: "I still believe war is a stupid and futile way of attempting to settle international difficulties. I believe war can be avoided and will be avoided when the people, the men and women in America, as well as in Germany, have the controlling voice in their government" (Smith, p.114). This statement hints at her belief that the world would be a more humane place if women were to obtain the right to vote—in more democratic countries the world over.

She did much work in her first term, aside from issues dealing with the war effort. She opposed the Espionage Act, a law that targeted foreign born residents of the U.S. and aimed at suppression of anyone labeled as a war dissident. This was the law that was used to put the International Workers of the World (IWW) union leader, Eugene Debs, behind bars for speaking against the draft. This opposition underscores Rankin's support for civil liberties and the right to freedom of speech. She worked hard for many progressive political reforms including civil liberties, women's suffrage, birth control, equal pay and child welfare. In 1917, she opened the debate on the floor of the House for the Susan B. Anthony Amendment (for women's right to vote) which actually passed in the House during 1917, but was not passed by the Senate until the following year, and did not get ratified until after Rankin was out of office.

Jeanette Rankin had other notable accomplishments in the area of women's rights. She introduced the first bill that would have given women rights and citizenship independent of their husbands. She supported government funding of prenatal and childcare education for women. She also championed labor rights, drawing attention to the deplorable working conditions of the miners in her state. During her

historic, first term of office she sided with the miners in Montana, insisting on fair pay and safer working conditions in the mines. Of course, during the war effort precious metals were crucial and Montana was furnishing about 20 percent of the copper being mined in the U.S. On June 8, 1917 a fire in one of Anaconda Cooper's Montana mines killed 167 miners. The surviving miners walked off the job in protest. At this point, one of the union leaders was lynched and left with a sign around his neck that read: "others take notice, first and last warning" (Smith, p.129). Jeannette quickly sided with the miners, she traveled to the site of the labor dispute in Butte, Montana and she issued a statement that denounced the prioritization of wartime profiteering over the safety of the miners.

What probably sealed her fate, and ended any hope for a second term of office, was not so much her opposition to the war, as her staunch support of miners in Montana, against the interests of the Anaconda Cooper Company—a business that had links to several Montana newspapers. In 1918 she unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for the Senate, and ran an unsuccessful campaign for that office as an independent candidate. The Montana newspapers ran stories falsely accusing her of being a radical, communist sympathizer during the so-called first "red scare." She was accused of being a radical socialist, and an IWW sympathizer—none of which was true. The accusations alone proved difficult to overcome.

Founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and peace activist

Rejected and smeared in the political scene of the year following her first term of office, she decided to join Jane Addams (a later Noble Peace Prize laureate) as a delegate to the Second International Congress of Women for Permanent Peace—later renamed as the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The organizers of that organization were prominent women who were connected to the International Suffrage Alliance. These were women around the world who saw the connection between their struggle for equal rights and the struggle for peace as inextricably intertwined. Thus commenced a decade long journey of peace activism for Rankin wherein she was a prominent social justice advocate for workers, women, children and immigrants. In 1920, she became founding vice president of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). When this organization was formed, racial segregation was legal and violence against Blacks occurred on a regular basis in America. The Supreme Court had not yet heard a single case involving the free speech claim under the First Amendment. In its first year the ACLU worked to stop the deportation of immigrant for their radical beliefs. They also worked to create and uphold the rights of unions to hold meetings and organize. In addition, these first years, in which Jeannette was involved, saw efforts to secure the release of hundreds of persons who were sentenced to prison for simply expressing their opposition to World War I. In 1924, Rankin bought land in rural Georgia where she lived simply and there, in Athens, she founded the Georgia Peace society.

She returned to Montana every summer so as to maintain her legal residence. From her base in Georgia, Jeannette Rankin became the Field Secretary of the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and lobbied for peace. When she left the WILPF she formed the Georgia Peace Society, and she regularly interacted with intellectuals at the University of Georgia, in Athens. She lobbied for the Women's Peace Union, working for an antiwar constitutional amendment. She left the Peace Union, and began working with the National Council for the Prevention of War. She also lobbied for American cooperation with the World Court and for labor reforms and an end to child labor.

On September 10, 1933, shortly after Franklin Roosevelt had taken office, Rankin, along with her ACLU friends and Jane Addams (leader of WILPF and Noble prize winner) met with the President. This group urged him to relax American immigration laws, specifically to admit religious and political refugees, and to offer asylum to victims of the Nazi regime in Germany (Women in Congress, 2006). One wonders how many German Jews' lives would have been saved if only Roosevelt had followed their advice.

In the first half of 1937, she spoke in 10 states, giving 93 speeches for peace. She supported the America First Committee, but decided that lobbying was not the most effective way to work for peace. By 1939, she had returned to Montana and was running for Congress again, supporting a strong but neutral America in yet another time of impending war.

Elected with a small plurality, Jeannette Rankin arrived in Washington in January as one of six women in the House, and two in the Senate. When, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Congress voted to declare war against Japan, Jeannette Rankin once again voted "no" to war. She also, once again, violated a long standing tradition and spoke before her roll call vote, this time saying "As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else" as she voted alone against the war resolution. She was denounced by the press and her colleagues, and barely escaped an angry mob. She believed that Roosevelt had deliberately provoked the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In 1943, Rankin went back to Montana rather than run for Congress again (and surely be defeated). She took care of her mother and traveled worldwide, including to India and Turkey, promoting peace, and tried to found a woman's commune on her Georgia farm. In 1968, she led more than five thousand women in a protest in Washington, DC, demanding the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam, heading up the group calling itself the Jeannette Rankin Brigade. She was active in the antiwar movement, often invited to speak or honored by the young antiwar activists and feminists.

Jeannette Rankin died in 1973 in Carmel, California. Earlier in her life she could accept the need for a substantial military as a defense force for national security. But later on, voicing her opposition to American involvement in the War in Vietnam she had said that the mere existence of a sizable military force would ultimately lead to some reason for entering into a war. She became a fervent supporter or disarmament for this reason—if nuclear or biological weapons exist, it will only be a matter of time before they are used in war, even if the rationale for possessing them is said to be for defensive purposes. It is a shame that more world leaders do not pay heed to this very sober warning. The question is not if weapons of mass destruction are going to be used. If they exist in a multi-lateral international setting, they will be used. She was well aware of the connection between arms and profits for the companies that produce weapons.

It is quite likely that students will not find a reference to Jeanette Pickering Rankin in the typical high school level history or social studies textbook. It is clear that this woman made history, playing a major role as a pacifist and a leader of the suffragette movement in America. The fact that her efforts are not celebrated may be attributable to the fact that she became quite unpopular when she cast the only dissenting vote in the U.S. House of Representatives in opposition to the Declaration of War against the Japanese immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It is understandable that she was not particularly popular with many of her contemporaries. And yet, her message needs to be heard in a 21st century world pervaded by terror, war, and civil unrest.

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