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BY NORMA SMITH

THE WOMAN WHO SAID NO TO WAR

A Day in the Life of Jeannette Rankin



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress.

IN 1916 THE MINERS, COWBOYS, and housewives of Montana elected a woman, 36-year-old Jeannette Rankin, to the United States Congress. One of the first women in the world to be elected to a major legislative body, she had surmounted the added disadvantage of being a Republican in a Democratic state and a Democratic year. The country was astounded, for in most states a woman could not even vote. The Capital almost expected a little country girl to come riding into Washington astride a buckskin pony, a Winchester at her side. Or that she would fit some biased stereotype of a strident man-hating suffragist in dowdy clothes.

She was neither. She spoke well; she dressed well; she liked men and they liked her; she could ride a horse, sidesaddle, but she drove a car. Nor was she a country bumpkin. She had two college degrees. She had traveled the country east and west, north and south, campaigning for woman suffrage. She had studied social conditions in New Zealand. She had lobbied in Congress.

As for the imagined Winchester, this woman from the land of cowboys and Indians and grizzly bears never touched a gun, for Jeannette Rankin was a pacifist. Acclaimed for her unique feminine achievement of being elected to Congress, she was almost immediately derided for her "unmanly" vote against the First World War. She was to repeat that vote against the Second World War, and thus make her mark as the only Representative to vote against both wars.

"The first vote of the first woman member of Congress was a vote against war," Jeannette was to say many times in the future. "It was not only the most significant thing *I* ever did; it was a significant thing in itself."

She hadn't expected, when she ran for Congress, to be voting on American involvement in the European war. Little war sentiment had been expressed during the summer and fall of 1916. Her constituents knew she was a pacifist; they had reelected President Woodrow Wilson on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." The situation changed rapidly, however, in January, 1917, when Germany, gambling on a quick victory before the United States could act, announced resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson then announced the end of diplomatic relations with Germany. American public opinion was further inflamed when several American merchant ships were sunk without warning.

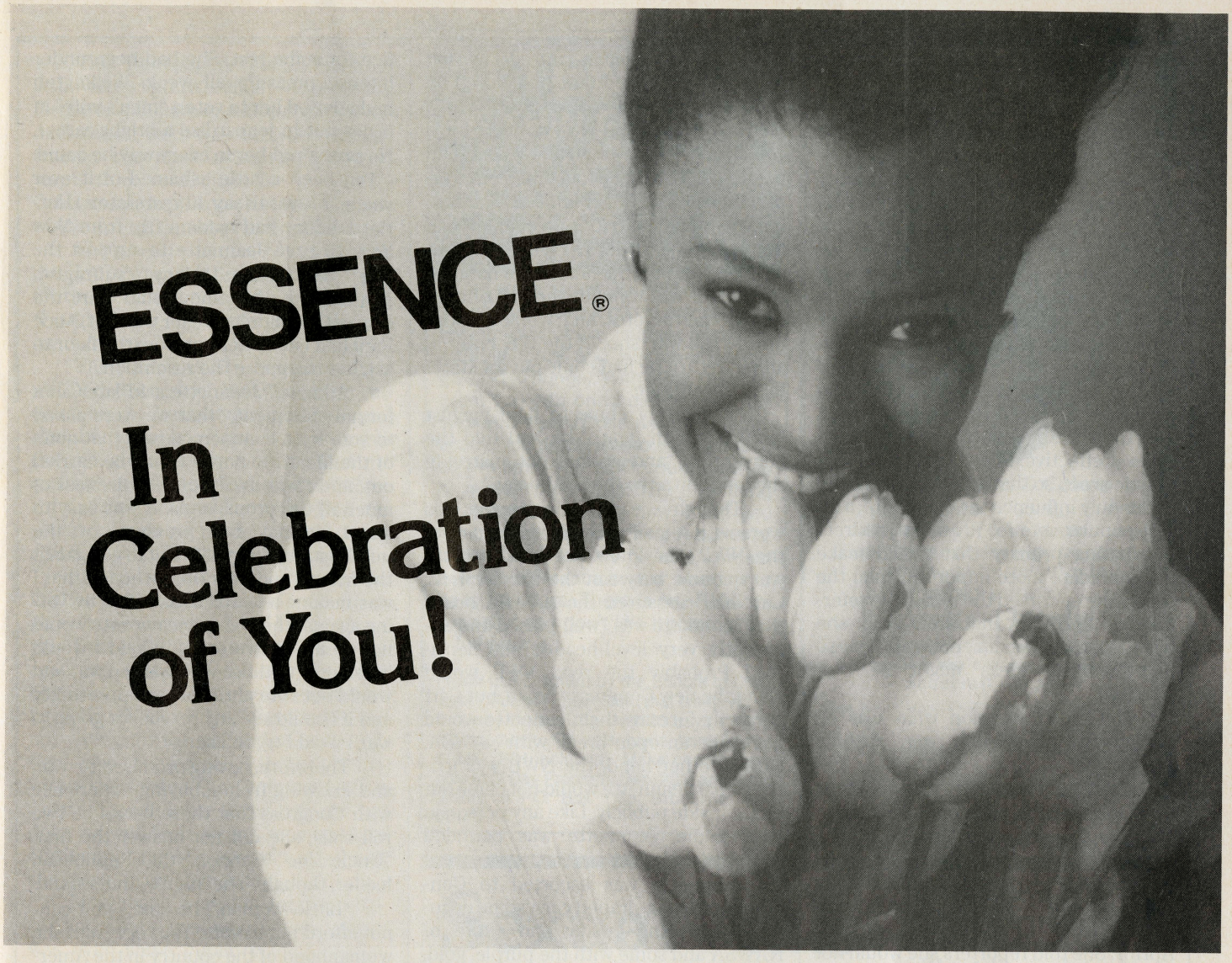
In this political climate, Jeannette and her younger brother, Wellington, arrived in February in New York on their way to Washington. Wellington was Jeannette's much-loved only brother and chief political adviser. Only 32, he was already a highly successful Montana businessman and lawyer. Jeannette and Wellington were visiting their friends, James and Harriet Laidlaw, wealthy supporters of the woman suffrage movement. With Wellington tall and handsome by her side, Jeannette gave her first press conference, evading questions about House politics and universal military training. She said women would support their country. She would support tariff legislation if it benefited the workers. And she was in favor of national woman suffrage, a farm loan law, extension of child welfare reform, and opening Congressional hearings to the public.

Shopping with Harriet, Jeannette paid $200 for an afternoon dress to wear at the opening of Congress. A dinner invitation to Oyster Bay came from ex-President Theodore Roosevelt. Wellington was eager to meet the great man; he, like Jeannette, counted himself a progressive Republican. "It was the most important engagement of my life," said Wellington. Indeed, Wellington and Roosevelt did most of the talking themselves. "There's no need of this war at all," Roosevelt said, "and we're going to war... a crime and a shame... the Kaiser was convinced we wouldn't go into it... if he had thought we would, he never would have started it."

But Roosevelt did not advise Jeannette on how to vote.

A freshman Congressman from New York City, progressive Republican Fiorello La Guardia, asked them to lunch. He, too, had had an astonishing victory. Bucking Tammany Hall, he was the first Republican to be elected from his district. He was a liberal with views similar to Jeannette's, and they began a close 30-year friendship.

Jeannette was honored by an invitation to speak in Carnegie Hall and was introduced by Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Friction between the two—Catt's bossy ways, her militaristic attitudes, and her state-by-state approach to suffrage—had been among the reasons Jeannette had left the movement and gone into



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politics on her own. No doubt Catt now regretted her previous hints that Jeannette should stay out of politics (but who would have supposed the woman could actually be elected?).

Jeannette spoke on "Democracy and Government," illustrating her theme with examples of conditions in Montana. She told her audience that the old egalitarian ways of the nation, when it was smaller and simpler, were like the simplicities of Montana, with its frontier overtones. But unfortunately, the natural resources of Montana, like those of the United States, were concentrated in the hands of a few. People needed not only the vote, but also the machinery to make it effective. She wanted a corrupt practices act, so that great wealth would not unduly influence the electorate; a direct popular vote for President; a direct nominating primary that would make the candidate more important than the party. She endorsed the recall, the referendum, and the initiative. And she wanted proportional representation, so that minority ideas might be represented.

She didn't mention what was on everybody's mind—the war, rushing nearer.

Congress was not scheduled to meet in regular session until December, 1917, so Jeannette left New York for a month's speaking tour. But as war fever heated up, President Wilson suddenly called a special session for April 2. Jeannette hurried to Washington, arriving April 1. She told reporters she would not say how she would vote on the war, that she would "study the situation."

"You know I am in a pretty predicament," she explained. "I had no idea Congress was going to open so soon.... I have so much to learn that I don't know what to say.... So I have just decided not to say anything at all."

On the day Congress opened, suffragists honored Jeannette at a hotel breakfast. There were now two national suffrage organizations, split not only over tactics, money, and strong personal conflicts between Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul, leader of the rival National Woman's Party (NWP), but also over the war. Sitting between Catt and Paul, Jeannette saw her difficult position in visual and dramatic form. Many women were wearing pacifist white arm bands. Yet at a mass meeting Catt had just offered the services of the women's movement to the burgeoning war effort.

Jeannette and others believed Catt's offer was part of a deal she had made with President Wilson in the summer of 1916. A Southerner who had always opposed woman suffrage, Wilson had just announced that he favored its adoption state-by-state, Mrs. Catt's method. (The NWP was working for a constitutional amendment.) Wilson had been invited to speak at Catt's NAWSA annual meeting in September. The timing was significant, for Catt had jumped the convention from December to September, two months before the national election. It was thought she had offered him women's votes and women's support of the war, should the U.S. enter it, and in return he had come out for state-by-state suffrage.

"I have not come to fight against [you] but with [you]," he had told the convention, "and we shall not quarrel in the long run as to the method of it."

Though Jeannette's sympathies were with Alice Paul and the pacifists of the NWP, she knew she must steer a wary course between the two factions. Catt had reassured the NAWSA board that Jeannette was "well-poised and apparently very level-headed and sensible." Probably the rival NWP would claim the new Congresswoman, but Catt correctly foresaw that Jeannette would not make an open break with NAWSA. On the other hand, the NWP was irritated that Jeannette would not come out on their side publicly. Like any person in the middle, Jeannette was pounded from both sides.

Jeannette was escorted to Congress by 25 flag-draped cars, some decorated with the yellow and white of NAWSA and some with the purple, gold, and white of the NWP. Finding her office filled with flowers, she chose those from the NWP to carry to the House floor.

On April 5, the House met to consider the declaration of war already passed by the Senate, with only six dissenting votes. Five minutes' speaking time was given alternately to opposing sides. War proponents spoke of the brutality of the Germans, the importance of upholding American interests by not "knuckling under," loyalty to our fair country, our flag red-white-and-blue, lives lost to German submarines. Opponents said that the measure was being jammed through, the people did not want war, they didn't want conscription, and they didn't want the war loans and the high cost of living that would follow.

On and on went the speeches, past midnight and into the morning of April 6, Good Friday. One member suggested that the vote be postponed so as not to vote for war on the anniversary of the murder of the Prince of Peace. He was ignored.

Jeannette retired briefly to her office for some rest. She had been under intense pressure all week. Wellington had advised her to vote a "man's vote" in order not to jeopardize a bright career. He pressured her in every way he could. ("I've been a little ashamed of it ever since," he was to say 40 years later.) Harriet Laidlaw had made a trip from New York to urge Jeannette to support the war declaration. Many suffragists pointed out that she would hurt the cause if she didn't vote for war. Yet, Alice Paul had called her out from the floor to ask her to oppose the resolution.

"I knew," Jeannette said later, in a formal statement, "that we were asked to vote for a commercial war, that none of the idealistic hopes would be carried out, and I was aware of the falseness of much of the propaganda. It was easy to stand against the pressure of the militarists, but very difficult to go against the friends and dear ones who felt that I was making a needless sacrifice by voting against the war, since my vote would not be a decisive one.... I said I would listen only to those who wanted war and would not vote until the last opportunity and if I could see any reason for going to war I would try to change."

Therefore, having promised to wait, and knowing from lobbying experience with Congress that there would be two roll calls, she did not answer the first. "Uncle Joe" Cannon, the Republican leader, thought she didn't understand.

"Little woman," he said, "you cannot afford not to vote. You represent the womanhood of the country in the American Congress. I shall not advise you how to vote, but you should vote one way or the other."

On the second roll call, she rose and with a shaking voice said, "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war. I vote No."

There was hubbub on the floor and in the galleries, including a scattering of applause. The clerk could not hear. Some members shouted "Vote. Vote. Vote." The chief clerk asked if she intended to vote "No." She nodded, pressed her hands to her eyes, and sat down.

On went the vote: 373 for, 50 against, nine not voting. The House adjourned at 3:14 A.M.

Wellington, walking Jeannette home in the dawn of Good Friday, told her that she had "crucified" herself. "You know you're not going to be reelected.... There will be a lot of feeling."

"I'm not interested in that," she replied. "All I'm interested in is what they'll say fifty years from now."

The newspapers made much of Jeannette's vote. Although 55 men in the House and Senate had also opposed the declaration, hers was the vote that attracted the most attention. She had wept, they said, just like a woman. Others said she did not. Her tears, or lack of them, occasioned a national debate.

Fiorello La Guardia, whose desk in the House was near hers, and who voted for the declaration, said he didn't know. "I could not see, because of the tears in my own eyes."

The New York *Times* said she had justified distrust of her judgment and opinions. A Presbyterian minister said she should resign. Hardest to bear was the thought that her vote had hurt the suffrage movement. In New York some suffragists canceled her speaking engagements. But in public, at least, many stood by her. Harriet Laidlaw told the *Times* that "she did her duty as she saw it after the most terrible mental struggles any woman ever had." Carrie Chapman Catt said that no matter which way Jeannette voted she would be criticized, but she put a clear distance between herself and Jeannette: "Miss Rankin was not voting for the suffragists of the nation—she represents Montana." Privately she wrote, "Our Congress Lady is a sure enough joker. Whatever she has done or will do is wrong to somebody, and every time she answers a roll call, she loses us a million votes."

Montanans were not terribly critical, and after a cooling-off period, there was even some public commendation. One paper wrote a little later: "Montana's Congresswoman is now very popular.... Her mind is honest and open, and she has evident courage to back her convictions."

After the vote, since the voice of democracy had spoken, Jeannette supported the war effort, spoke for Liberty Bonds, and voted for most of the Administration measures, including the selective draft. She did, however, vote against the Espionage Act of 1917, an act which became a vehicle for baiting aliens and suppressing dissent.

Jeannette never regretted her vote. Twenty years later, some four years before America's entry into the Second World War, she was to say prophetically, "I would vote No again."

And so she did. Ms.

Norma Smith lives in Wenatchee, Washington, and has written an as yet unpublished biography of Jeannette Rankin ("Fighting Pacifist: Jeannette Rankin and Her Times"). They knew each other and visited frequently during the last 12 years of Rankin's life.

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