CULTURE DESK

HAS ANYTHING CHANGED FOR FEMALE POLITICIANS?

Familiar echoes in the candidacy of Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress.

By Kate Walbert, AUGUST 16, 2016

In 1917, Jeannette Rankin became the first woman to serve in Congress.

Early May and the lilacs are in bloom, the forsythias just past their prime, as Colonel E. Jacob Crull, of Roundup, Montana, climbs the front steps of a funeral establishment in Elkhart, Indiana. He carries a bottle of muriatic acid and the refrain "beaten by a woman," a taunt he has hoped to escape by visiting his sister in their home town. But the national newspapers are filled with accounts of the arrival, in Washington, of Jeannette Rankin as a Republican representative to the House—the first woman to serve in Congress. Crull, the fifty-eight-year-old unmarried lawyer and former member of the Montana legislature whom she defeated in the primaries, believed that a spot on the 1916 Republican ticket would make the beginning of a brilliant political career in Washington. Defeat at the hands of a woman has crushed his ambition and will to live. Two boys will find him later that day, "huddled on the steps"; he is taken to a local hospital—his last words, "I'm heartbroken."

Purveyor of truth, the North Platte *Semi-Weekly Tribune* puts the blame squarely on Rankin's shoulders in its lede: "The sting of defeat, administered by a woman—Miss Jeannette Rankin, congresswoman from Montana—made Jacob Crull, prominent Montana politician, commit suicide."

Rankin is born on a ranch outside Missoula, in 1880. While she is learning to ride and hunt, many of the world's leading intellectuals are pondering the "woman question." Charles Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, compares the "willy-nilly disposition of the female" to a butterfly. The evolutionist Grant Allen opines that, while he would like to see a woman far more "emancipated than she herself as yet at all desires," it's "mathematically demonstrable" that "most women must become the mothers of at least four children or else the race must cease to exist." The women's-rights movement, he concludes, is sadly "pursuing a chimera."

"Go! Go! Go!" Rankin writes in her college journal. "It makes no difference where just so you go! Go! Go!" Long before she enters Congress, she forges her commitment to issues affecting women and children, in the years following her graduation from the University of Montana. The year she receives her degree, 1902, is the same year that the visionary Jane Addams's "Democracy and Social Ethics" is published. Visiting her brother at Harvard in 1904, Rankin witnesses the tenements and slums of a crowded city. She spends time at a settlement house in San Francisco, and then travels east to study at the New York School of Philanthropy. After her return, in 1909, she works at the Washington Children's Home Society, in Spokane, then joins that state's suffrage campaign, in 1910. She speaks to the Montana legislature on suffrage the following year, as a representative of the Missoula Political Equality Club, and leads the suffrage movement to success in Montana, in 1914. (Reports that she does so on horseback are largely exaggerated.) Later, she travels throughout the country as a field secretary for the National American Woman Suffrage Association before landing in Washington, D.C., as a lobbyist. Rankin "put the lob in lobbying," a friend said.

A gigantic plaster elk, sixty-two feet tall and forty-four feet long, straddles the corners of Broadway and Main Street, constructed courtesy of Butte Elks Lodge 0240 to commemorate Independence Day, 1916. The copper ore of its green patina is from the nearby mines that have made Butte the largest city between Seattle and Minneapolis. It is here, a week after the Fourth of July festivities, that Rankin announces her intentions to those gathered in a local restaurant—her aim, now that suffrage has been won in Montana, is to run on the G.O.P. ticket for the House of Representatives. She is the sole woman among eight contenders for the spot; her slogan

—"Let the People Know"— is a promise to hold the politicians in Washington accountable to their constituents. She also pledges to fight for eight-hour workdays for women, child-labor laws, and a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. "Nothing else will go so far toward overcoming the prejudice against women in office and nothing would be greater aid to the feminist movement than to have the higher offices filled by women," she says.

When news reaches Missoula that Rankin has won the general election by a plurality of 7,567 votes, reporters and photographers crowd the front lawn of her house in town, curious to bring back news of the "lady from Montana"—specifically what she looks like, what she's wearing. (From across the country, her colleague Carrie Chapman Catt, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, questions Rankin's credentials; the first woman in office should be an "intellectual"—certainly not a Westerner without a law degree.) Rankin morphs in the press from small and slight with "locks of fire" to "tall and slender, with frank hazel eyes, sandy hair, and energetic mouth." She gets several marriage proposals by mail; a toothpaste company offers her five thousand dollars for a photograph of her teeth. It is reported that she can "dance like a boarding school girl" and that she makes her own hats. "I am glad glad glad even to Pollyannaism," one newspaperwoman writes, "that Jeannette is not 'freakish' or 'mannish' or 'standoffish' or 'shrewish' or of any type likely to antagonize the company of gentlemen whose realm has hitherto been uninvaded by petticoats."

A few days after she's elected, Rankin sits for an interview, no doubt putting readers at ease by sewing while answering questions; the journalist confirms that, even after entering politics, Rankin has "refused to forsake the old household arts, cooking and needlework." Meanwhile, Rankin makes clear that one of her first orders of business in the Capitol will be to fight for laws "providing that women shall be paid the same wages as men for equal amounts of work."

There is rumbling that Rankin's gender has given her an unfair advantage with women voters. The Great Falls *Tribune* takes the Democratic women of the state of Montana to task for voting overwhelmingly for President Woodrow Wilson and then "reversing themselves" to "elect the Hon. Jeanette [*sic*] Rankin, Republican,

Congressman or Congresswoman at large, 'merely because of sex.' " The New York *Times* debates the math, writing that, if the "Wilson women" had voted only along gender lines, Rankin's plurality would have been greater by thousands. "Montana Democrats should forgive Miss Rankin for her election, nor lay blame therefore on the 'illogical' Democratic women."

Others raise legal questions concerning the final clause of the second paragraph of Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution, which says that no person shall be a representative "who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that state in which *he* shall be chosen" (emphasis added). The *Daily Missoulian* consults constitutional lawyers and concludes that, since the House of Representatives is responsible for judging the qualifications of its members, it's "dollars to doughnuts" that the House will confirm Rankin's eligibility—especially given that "since the returns of the recent election have been studied, politicians are no longer disposed to sneer at the woman voter."

According to a professor of economics at the University of Montana, one of the biggest problems facing Rankin is the "mental baggage" her male colleagues have carried around for so many years that will have to be jettisoned. And what to call her? From the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, Lora Kelly writes in her Through the Periscope column that some "inventive word shark" better figure it out fast since " 'congresswoman' sounds odd." Her suggestions are "Congressette or Congressist."

The New York *Sun* warns of all that will have to change: "Profanity will become a lost art in the lobby," and there must be "no more . . . throwing of inkstands and fisticuffs." Women's bathrooms will be constructed, but for now Rankin will have to use the public ones. Perhaps as a safeguard, perhaps as a sly suggestion, Rankin is assigned to room 332 in the House Office Building, across the hall from Representative Moses P. Kinkaid, of Nebraska, "regarded as the most confirmed bachelor in Congress." It is noted by the newspaper reporters who find her there on the first day that there is nothing in the way of "flowers or feminine knick-knacks" in her office.

Rankin enters the House on April 2, 1917, in an extraordinary session called by President Wilson to debate war with Germany. The question is not how Rankin will

vote but how a woman will vote. (Catt and many of the leaders of the national suffrage movement have urged her to vote for war; anything less, they assure her, will irrevocably set back the cause.) The men stand and applaud as she enters the House, dressed in blue and carrying a bouquet of flowers. She later remembers that, as she walks in, she's a little worried, unclear where she should sit: at thirty-six and unmarried, she does not want to be accused of flirting.

Thirty-two Republicans, sixteen Democrats, one Socialist, and one independent vote against the war resolution in the early hours of April 6, 1917, Rankin among them. The following day, the headlines focus solely on her, the *Times* reporting that she's hysterical as she votes, her appearance "that of a woman on the verge of a breakdown," and that "she pressed her hands to her eyes, threw her head back and sobbed." She denies it, saying she had already cried all her tears during the debate. Representative John E. Raker, of California, sitting an arm's length away, also denies that the congresswoman cried during roll call. Afterward, a friend writes that nobody believes the "sobbing fiction." Still, the spectre of Rankin weeping remains, proof for many of the "feminine incapacity of straight reasoning."

(Rankin does break protocol by speaking a sentence instead of responding with a monosyllabic yea or nay to cast her vote: "I want to stand by my country," she says, "but I cannot vote for war.")

Rankin's supposed tears are proof for others of a calculated self-interest. "You are just a cheap little actress," an observer writes, "putting on a sob act to land publicity to help sell tickets for your lecture bureau." Rankin has a contract for a series of lectures; it is widely known that she is handsomely paid, five hundred dollars per talk, by the Lee Keedick Agency. Less widely known is the cancellation clause included if she votes against war.

"Men, I am convinced that our first duty is to remasculinize America, and that to this end we in this state must stand as a wall against the wave of effeminacy which now threatens the semi-emasculation of our electorate"—The activist Henry Wise Wood, April 30, 1917, addressing the Great Hall at Cooper Union on the new "masculine age."

Soon after she takes her seat in the House, Rankin speaks in support of Joint Resolution 200, framing the proposal to amend the Constitution of the United States to extend suffrage to women as a matter of human rights.

"Might it not be," she says, "that the men who have spent their lives thinking in terms of commercial profit find it hard to adjust themselves to thinking in terms of human needs? Might it not be that a great force that has always been thinking in terms of human needs, and that always will think in terms of human needs, has not been mobilized?" The congressional record states that at the speech's conclusion there is "prolonged applause." It must have been a tremendous sound that only slowly gave way to the silence.

Tainted by the maelstrom of her congressional début, Rankin has a credibility issue, as critics ask voters whether they really want to "keep a woman in Congress." Her perseverance, however, is legendary. When districts are drawn in Montana in 1918, gerrymandering Rankin into a Democratic district, she counters by running for the Senate instead of the House. She is defeated in the G.O.P. primary by fewer than two thousand votes. She then runs as a National Party candidate and roundly loses. So there are no women in Congress the following year, when it finally votes to pass the Nineteenth Amendment.

Twenty-two years later, at the age of sixty, the Candidate tries again for Congress and wins. She has spent the intervening years working for peace and disarmament organizations and travelling the world. She returns to the House in 1941 and achieves instant notoriety and a swift end to her political career when she casts the sole vote against going to war with Japan.

Undaunted, Rankin never swerves from her dedication to pacifism; leads five thousand women in a march against the Vietnam War, at the age of eighty-seven; becomes the first inductee into the National Organization for Women's Susan B. Anthony Hall of Fame; and, after her death, is honored with a statue in the Capitol. And yet she somehow still remains, according to one academic, among the Western "orphans of women's history," many of her papers lost or ruined, a result of her "haphazard archival habits."

Was the "demon that possessed Jeannette Rankin," as is written in a 2005 biography, "her desire for fame and influence"? Or was her "lust for success," as an earlier author posited, the result of a "cancerous infatuation with her work"? Clearly Rankin's life has sometimes challenged scholarship—or maybe the relative dearth of biographies has more to do with the general perception that readers of books about the females who have changed the course of American history tend to reside either in women's-history departments or in the classrooms of elementary schools.

At the age of ninety-one, Rankin appears on "The Dick Cavett Show," sharing the stage with the silent-film star Gloria Swanson. Cavett asks, "Would you say that men have pretty well botched things up, all the years they've been in power?"

"Well, men have done very well considering they worked all on their own, and never took the help of women," Rankin replies. She remains a stylish dresser, although now she wears wigs and cat's-eye glasses, and walks with a cane. A little more than a year before she dies alone, in a retirement home in Carmel, California, Rankin tells a journalist that "if she had her life to relive, she'd do it all again." She adds, "But this time, I'd be nastier."

Kate Walbert is the author of a collection of short stories and four novels, among them A Short History of Women and The Sunken Cathedral, just out in paperback.

MORE: WOMEN'S RIGHTS