Sisters

The Lives of America's Suffragists

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"Mr. Wilson, you say that every people have a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live. What about 20 million American women?" In August the NWP banners labeled the president "Kaiser Wilson."

Paul grew ever more audacious. On June 20, when the Russian mission, representing the new provisional government of Kerensky and Lvov that had just enfranchised women, arrived at the White House, the pickets were prepared. As Bakmetief and his delegation drove through the gates of the White House, they were confronted with a large banner reading: "President Wilson and Envoy Root are deceiving Russia. We 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. Help us make our government really free. Tell our government that it must liberate its people before it can claim free Russia as an ally." In response, with Wilson proclaiming his innocence, a new presidentially approved White House policy was enforced.[60]

As uniformed police watched and before the mission left the White House grounds, plainclothesmen, most likely from the Secret Service, tore the banner from its supports and destroyed it. They had received, *The New York Times* charged, their orders directly from the president. The women returned with more banners targeting the president, only to be attacked by the crowd. The police merely observed the confrontation. Within hours the District's chief of police appeared at NWP Headquarters to threaten Paul that if the pickets demonstrated again, they would be arrested. "Why?" asked Paul. "Has picketing suddenly become illegal? Our lawyers have assured us all along that picketing was legal. Certainly it is as legal in June as in January." But neither rationality nor legality played any part in the capricious, inhumane treatment of the suffragists that followed.[61]

Paul had declined to use the more aggressive tactics of British militants, though the response of both governments to suffrage protests was the same. Her followers had not hurled stones through the White House windows, or hidden on the grounds. Nor had they followed Wilson on his golf outings or burned trees in Lafayette Park. But for the first time in American history, an organized group of dissidents,

not just a single individual like Thoreau, had employed passive resistance and civil disobedience in a direct confrontation with presidential authority.

On June 22 arrests for obstructing traffic began in front of the White House, though these first cases never came to trial. By midsummer suffragists were appearing regularly before a police magistrate who fined them twenty-five dollars or sentenced them to three days of imprisonment. The suffragists chose jail and there confronted abysmal prison conditions. They ate wormy food, slept on blankets on cement floors in unheated cells, wore scratchy prison clothes, and used the same open toilets and water buckets as syphilitic prostitutes. Among the complaints of these middle-class white suffragists who were accustomed to blacks only as servants was the humiliation of having to share their quarters with black women in jails that were racially segregated for common criminals. By the fall their sentences for obstructing traffic had escalated to sixty days in the Occaquan workhouse in Virginia. Several correspondents and political advisors warned the president of the bad publicity of sending the daughters and wives of prominent public officials to the workhouse. When two prominent Democrats whose relatives were in prison asked Wilson how he would like to see his wife sweeping floors in a dirty workhouse next to black prostitutes, the president was shocked and professed his ignorance. But now, said his friend Dudley Field Malone, who resigned his patronage position over Wilson's treatment of the suffragists, "you do know."[62]

In October Alice Paul was arrested for the third time, denied a jury trial, and sentenced to seven months in jail for obstructing traffic. On her way to prison, she explained to a reporter that she and other women of the National Woman's Party were being imprisoned not "because we obstruct traffic, but because we pointed out to the president the fact that he was obstructing the cause of democracy at home, while we are fighting for it abroad." Well known to the authorities, Paul was often targeted by police and by the young servicemen who roamed Pennsylvania Avenue, once fired a gun into headquarters, and frequently harassed the pickets. Like all the suffragists, Paul was denied legal counsel. Demanding political prisoner status, she was treated more harshly than common criminals: Paul was placed in a

"punishment" cell, subjected to constant scrutiny by a prison matron who shined a flashlight on her face every three hours, and, most dangerously, taken off to a psychiatric ward.[63]

Such treatment was a common enough method of dealing with unruly women, whose misbehavior was by definition evidence of madness. The intention of the District commissioners and the prison authorities was to remove Paul to nearby St. Elizabeths Hospital where she could be detained indefinitely. At some point Wilson sent a secret emissary, the journalist David Lawrence, to investigate. Paul remembered several strange men entering her cell late at night—for what she did not know, until one began asking questions about her mental state. If an alienist (the contemporary word for psychiatrist) could be persuaded that she displayed the symptoms of paranoia, perhaps taking the form of an obsessive hatred of Wilson, a permanent incarceration would be justified. But Paul was lucky. She was later examined by the enlightened superintendent of St. Elizabeths, Dr. William White, who pronounced her sane, and in fact remarkably well balanced considering her circumstances.[64]

Paul was in the second month of her sentence when on November 17 another group of women was arrested and taken off to the Occaquan workhouse in Virginia. So began what suffragists called the Night of Terror. When these women claimed political prisoner status, refused to give their names, and asked to see their lawyers, guards led by the brutish superintendent Alexander Whitaker, who had previously threatened his prisoners with his walking stick, threw them down stairs, dragged them off to isolation cells by their hair, and threatened sexual assaults and straitjackets. Lucy Burns spent part of the night with her hands handcuffed to the bars above her head. Dorothy Day was pummeled in what she likened to a football scrimmage. Seventy-year-old Mary Nolan was dragged along a damp floor and hurled into a cell. Alice Cosu vomited all night from a concussion. And like Paul, all of them began hunger strikes when they were denied political prisoner status. After three days they joined the growing numbers of women who were being force-fed in what Paul labeled "administration terrorism."[65]

Soon word of the brutality leaked to the press. The fact that long

tubes were being forcibly pushed up women's nostrils, down their throats, and into their stomachs not only suggested the vulnerability of women, but also seemed a disgusting sexual invasion of their bodies. Delegations protested to congressmen about such unconstitutional "cruel and unusual treatment." Telegrams and letters poured into the White House, including a form letter that asked Wilson's intervention "in the name of humanity to abolish the terrible treatment by men appointed by you [of those] asking for liberty and democracy for 20 million women." When they could not see the president, mothers converged on Tumulty with their complaints about "the unspeakable brutality." Letters from soldiers overseas worried about their imprisoned sisters and mothers appeared in newspapers. Alice's quiet sister Helen came to Washington and, interviewed by the press, criticized Wilson for risking her sister's life.[66] And among those who were imprisoned, jail proved, as it would for future dissidents, a good training ground for sacrificial service to the cause. For years afterward the imprisoned women referred to each other as "dear cellmate."[67]

Publicly sidestepping the matter of the arrests on the grounds that authority rested with the District commissioners, the president at first announced that he was satisfied with the way things were being handled. When suffragists pointed out that the president appointed the officials who arrested and harassed them, Wilson responded that the authority to issue permits for gatherings and meetings on public streets was not under his jurisdiction. Nor did he have control over the municipal statutes defining obstruction of traffic. Yet privately the president was furious that officers of the government "have indulged these women in their desire for arrest and martyrdom." Press coverage must stop, and there must be no more arrests until he approved them, a condition that made him complicit with the future mistreatment of members of NWP. The fact of the matter was that Wilson had signaled the necessity of stopping the pickets, but had initially delegated the specific means to others.[68]

Certainly, Wilson insisted when asked, there were no political prisoners in the United States. Nor were these women arrested under the new Sedition Act, in part because they quoted Wilson and thereby protected themselves from indictments under the newly passed legis-

lation that made it illegal to criticize U.S. participation in World War I. As Wilson understood, his own words could hardly be deemed treasonous.

Called almost daily to the White House during this period, the District commissioners reported to the president on the status of the jailed suffrage women. Commissioner Louis Brownlow agreed that his frivolous tactic of tempting fasting women with the allure of ham frying in a nearby kitchen had not been successful. William Gardiner, the most mendacious of the commissioners, provided a written report stating that Paul found her cell clean and well ventilated, approved of the food, and did not mind the force-feedings which, in the commissioner's view, were innocuous, though he had previously been informed by the head of the district jail that they could be dangerous. Paul only sought publicity, Gardiner assured the president, and was using the episode as a fund-raising tactic. Intent on trivializing the episode, Wilson was pleased with any information that corroborated his position. And the commissioners encouraged his conviction that these women were unpatriotic lunatics simply making nuisances of themselves. According to the president, their treatment "has been grossly exaggerated and misrepresented."[69]

Then suddenly on November 27—in an action dictated by the uproar over the force-feedings as well as the convening of a Republican Congress a week later—Wilson pardoned the jailed suffragists. Paul was outraged. "We are put out of jail as we were put in it—at the whim of the government. The attempt by the government to terrorize and suppress us has failed." The next day amid her exuberant followers Paul was back at work in her office, making certain that all those who had been arrested provided formal affidavits of their treatment because she intended to ask for a congressional investigation. She also planned a celebration at the Belasco Theater where the freed prisoners received their "jail pins." Within weeks the Suffrage Prison Special left Washington's Union Station on a national tour with suffragists dressed in prison attire the prime exhibits of Wilson's tyranny.[70]

Not every American applauded their release. Some were outraged at women who instead of helping the Red Cross and serving in the Women's National Defense League mocked the president. A few canceled their subscriptions to *The Suffragist* and resigned from the party.

Others refused to believe the stories of force-feeding. "They must be," wrote Henry Hall to the president, "either traitors or degenerates." In Memphis, Nashville, and Los Angeles, members of the NWP were denied the use of public meeting halls as rumors circulated that they would be prosecuted under the Sedition Act.[71]

Catt and the leaders of NAWSA complimented the president on his "serene and touching" handling of the "so-called" pickets. In turn Wilson insisted that he had not been influenced "by the actions of so small a fraction of the suffrage movement." Yet when Catt pressed for presidential support for an amendment, Wilson noted how busy he and the special session of Congress were with matters of war. An obliging Catt understood. At its annual convention NAWSA agreed to give up its lobbying for the duration.[72]

Other American women, however, found the NWP activism inspiring and volunteered to become pickets. Among them was Katherine Houghton Hepburn. Once a staunch member of the Connecticut branch of NAWSA, Hepburn now found that organization "futile, academic and out of date." She was angry that Shaw, Catt, and other leaders of NAWSA, like the antisuffragists, disparaged the National Woman's Party at a time when unity was required. In her resignation letter to NAWSA Hepburn expressed her admiration for the [NWP's] "honesty, self-forgetfulness and their practical wisdom." Soon she was carrying their banners.[73]

The president again omitted suffrage from his recommendations to Congress in December 1917. It was not a war measure, he said. Nor could he "volunteer" his advice about the matter to Congress. But what the president said at home was diverging from what he claimed abroad. In January 1918 he had laid out his international goals for the self-determination of all nations in his Fourteen Points Address. Here the president included a proposal for what became the League of Nations, and he made clear that all nations had the right to expect "justice and fair dealing as against force and selfish aggression . . . unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us."[74]

But for all his high-minded concern for a new international order, Wilson was also cognizant of the growing popularity of women's suffrage at home. In November 1917 a suffrage referendum passed in New York, after Tammany Hall decided that it was impolitic to alie-

nate women by opposing the amendment. Shortly after Wilson's Fourteen Points Address, the House of Representatives, for only the second time in forty years, was preparing to vote on the suffrage amendment. The afternoon before that vote, a delegation of Democrats arrived at the White House to ascertain the president's position.

A president who had never wanted to be too far ahead of his party was now falling behind. After the meeting Congressman Edward Taylor reported, "the president said that he had always stood on the Democratic platform . . . he still believed the orderly and systematic way of adopting equal suffrage was by state action, but while he had not changed, all the conditions under which we are living have changed and the world is a different place from the world of a few years ago." With such obfuscation and on the basis of women's patriotic service during the war, Wilson encouraged congressmen to vote affirmatively. His influence proved critical. The amendment passed the House 274 to 136, exactly the necessary two-thirds constitutionally required. "We knew all along that Wilson's support and it alone would ensure our success," Paul told a reporter.[75]

Still, the president had no intention of publicizing his support. Displaying the stubborn self-righteousness that would soon wreck his plans for the Senate's approval of the League of Nations, Wilson kept his views secret. Thereby the president limited his influence on a matter he still hoped might disappear—or at least be stalled in the Senate. His position was so confusing that even the complacent Catt complained that "the general opinion prevails that . . . he is not sincere in his advocacy of the federal amendment."[76]

It was a year and a half before the Susan B. Anthony amendment passed both houses of Congress, the Senate finally giving the requisite two-thirds majority on June 4, 1919. In the interim, Paul again pressured the ever-reluctant president. In the summer of 1918 members of NWP returned to their picketing stations outside the White House gates, now burning in a permanent suffrage "watch fire" the president's "beautiful but empty words" and once even a cardboard effigy of Wilson. Alice Paul was imprisoned twice more, but following the British government's famous Cat and Mouse strategy, officials now temporarily released women before force-feeding was necessary, holding them, after they returned to their homes, available for rearrest without any further legal proceedings.[77]

In September 1918 Wilson capitulated. In an address to the Senate, on the eve of the vote in a body that included many Southern senators still opposed to women's suffrage, the president uttered the words Paul had been fighting for five years to hear: neither party, though it was mostly his Democrats, could justify not substituting "the Federal initiative for State initiative." Women's suffrage had become a necessary war measure to show a world looking to "the great, powerful, famous Democracy of the West to lead them to the new day for which they have so long waited," the president proclaimed. "If we reject measures like this, in ignorance or defiance of what a new age has brought forth . . . they will cease to believe in us." And in a utilitarian argument that irritated suffragists who believed that voting was their natural right, Wilson asked, "we have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right? " Suffrage, he argued, was less a right than a reward.

Having surrendered to a national amendment, the president dismissed Paul and her NWP. "The voices of the foolish and intemperate agitators" had not influenced him at all. Perhaps, but many Republicans insisted that "the pickets got the president" through their politicization of the issue and through their public efforts to display the president's hypocrisy of attachment to democracy overseas, but not at home. The advance had not been obtained through women's service in war organizations, but through their successful public efforts to display the duplicity of the president's democratic vision. So ended the confrontation between Woodrow Wilson and Alice Paul.[78]