

Representative Jeannette Rankin: The Suffragist

"You take people as far as they will go, not as far as you would like them to go"- Jeannette Rankin

In 1916, the norm for women was cooking, cleaning, and being a housewife. In essence, women were the unsung heroes who did all the work and received little to no credit. Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin was no different. Despite being the first female congresswoman, she endured paternalism and condescension from her colleagues. She faced incredible social barriers to success in office such as sexism and patriarchy. This manifested in the everyday social norms in which she was raised.

Born to parents Olive and John Rankin, on a small ranch in Montana, Rankin spent most of her life's work campaigning for women's rights and voting, during a time before women's suffrage was legal in many states. She would then go on to successfully run for Congress in 1916, representing Republicans in Montana. Astoundingly, she won 24% of the election votes. Before entering into federal office, Rankin's entry into Congress was hindered by congressmen who debated whether she, as a woman, should be allowed to hold a seat in the House of Representatives. Eventually, on April 2, 1917, she was introduced as the first female congressional representative. (History.com Editors, 2019).

While things appeared to look promising for the newly elected congresswoman, she would encounter sexism and paternalism on the job, particularly during wartime discussions. Joseph G. Cannon, a former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from Illinois, advised Rankin that she "cannot afford to not vote." He counseled her disclosing, "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 another." (Office of Historian, 2012). This shows that because she was a woman, she was counseled and advised on how to vote. There is the underlying connotation that she only represents "the womanhood of the country." The implication that she only represents one gender and not everyone as a whole, functioned as a way to keep her in her place of inferiority. Initially Rankin was hesitant to vote, as she was deemed "unpatriotic" if she voted against war, but ultimately she felt obliged to vote no. Knowing the risky decision she made, she said, "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war. I vote no." (Newland, 2020). Rankin profoundly felt that war was not in the best interest of the country, regardless of the consequences. She was only one of very few members to do so.

While being subjected to social adversity in her workplace, Rankin would further encounter criticism from the media. A Montana newspaper article mentions her as "a dagger in the hands of the German propagandists."(Greenspan,2016). This narrative the media conjured up to discredit Rankin as a leader, would reinforce the idea that women shouldn't be in power or hold significant roles in government. The slander would not stop there. Rankin was even more ridiculed in the media. She was once referenced as "a dupe of the Kaiser, a member of the Hun

army in the United States...a crying school girl.” (Greenspan, 2016). The backlash she received from critics would result in the end of her political career as a representative, after only one term. I think this emerged partially from the view of women as untrustworthy in relation to politics and substantial issues in government.

Rankin’s political journey doesn’t end there, however. When she rejoined Congress in 1940, she still endured many of the same sexist and social barriers. She would again vote against going to war, just after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. People did not appreciate or embrace her pacifist ideas and she was booed and hissed at in a session of Congress. Due to her opposition, she had to be escorted by police in order to return to her office. Unfortunately, Rankin was never able to recover politically, and the following year she refused to run for reelection. (Conkling, 2020). This further demonstrates how female politicians are often belittled and despised if they so much as voice their opinion against the majority.

Ultimately, Jeannette Rankin is known for being the first woman elected into federal office in the United States, but she’s so much more than that. Rankin single handedly challenged an entire field that was predominantly and historically dominated by men and remained steadfast in her beliefs, regardless of the repercussions. In an interview with Ralph Nader, he expressed “I’ve never met someone her age who refused to indulge in nostalgia. She’s always looking ahead.” In the interview the participants discuss how when women were given the right to vote they were “vilified” if they were against war. Congresswoman Rankin was undoubtedly one of these vilified women. Even after her political career, she never found work (Flander, 2020). Despite all the obstacles and shortcomings she faced, Rankin never neglected to advocate for her beliefs and doctrines. Jeannette Rankin was a woman of nobility and conviction. Her display of courage is one to remember.

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