Fearless Radicalism: Alice Paul and Her Fight for Women’s Suffrage

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2013.030302
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol3/iss3/2

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As Alice Paul took her last breath on July 9, 1977, nearly six decades had passed since the fight for Women’s Suffrage ended with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Her ninety-two year life experienced times of economic comfort, achievements in education, extreme political activism, and the fruition of one of her political goals—women’s suffrage. Although she never witnessed the passage of her ultimate goal of an Equal Rights Amendment, she could be credited with singlehandedly ending the seventy year fight for women’s suffrage. Fairly speaking, Alice Paul’s radicalism played the most crucial role in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment which gave women the right to vote.

Alice Stokes Paul’s life began on January 11, 1885 in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey. She was the first of four children born to Quaker parents William and Tacie Paul. William Paul served as the president of the Burlington County Trust Company, located in Moorestown, New Jersey, approximately three miles from Mt. Laurel, which provided for a comfortable means of living for the Paul family. Although Alice Paul experienced a relatively privileged life on her father’s farm, known as Paulsdale, she was still taught the Quaker traditions of working to benefit society, gender equality, non-materialistic values coupled with a close relationship to nature and
society, and modesty. As Alice grew older, she was a dedicated student throughout grade school and played several sports during her childhood, including basketball, baseball, and field hockey. After grade school, Alice Paul attended Swathmore College in 1901. She was required to attend this particular college, because her grandfather was one of the founding fathers of the institution and her mother swore that all of her children would attend Swathmore College for at least one year for the Quaker education if nothing else. While attending Swathmore, Alice Paul served as a member on the Executive Board of Student Government which may have sparked her eventual excitement for political activism. Of the four children of William and Tacie Paul, Alice Paul was the only one to graduate from Swathmore College and she did so with a Bachelor’s Degree in Biology in 1905.¹

Although all of these experiences shaped Alice Paul into the exuberant and outspoken woman she ultimately became, her mother was mostly responsible for introducing Alice to the fight for women’s equality and suffrage through the Woman’s Suffrage Movement. Tacie Paul was a devoted member of the National American Women’s Suffrage Association and often took Alice with her to the meetings and even hosted suffrage meetings at Paulsdale. This experience laid the foundation for Alice’s future belief in Women’s Suffrage. Between the Quaker principle of equality between the sexes and Tacie Paul introducing her daughter to the struggle for suffrage, Alice Paul had a firm basis for her eventual involvement in the Women’s Suffrage Movement.²

Alice Paul first became politically active in Birmingham, England, in 1907 at the age of twenty-two. When she originally travelled to England to gain experience in the social work

² Ibid.
field by working in the Woodbrooke Settlement, Alice Paul was first and foremost a quiet and reserved Quaker. However, during her stay in England, Alice Paul met the Pankhurst women, some of the most militant suffragettes in England, who not only led, but also endorsed “direct and visible measures, such as heckling, window smashing, and rock throwing, to raise public awareness about the suffrage issue.”\(^3\) The Pankhurst women, consisting of a mother and her two daughters, had a substantial impact on Alice Paul. They influenced Paul to the extent that she eventually joined their movement and admitted to “personally breaking more than forty-eight windows and being arrested and imprisoned on several occasions.”\(^4\) In addition to engaging in such radical actions of protest, the Pankhurst sisters also sparked the idea of holding the political party in power responsible for the discrimination against women. Alice Paul believed that these extreme actions drew significant attention to the Women’s Suffrage Movement in England. Thus, just two years after her return to the United States in 1910, she began to employ these same militant tactics along with the idea of political accountability in the United States. As a result of this hope, Alice Paul officially began her career as a suffragette in the United States.\(^5\)

The most prevalent organization fighting for Women’s Suffrage during this time was the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Its leader, Carrie Chapman Catt, was an extraordinary president, but she believed in a more moderate version of political activism that had been a trademark of NAWSA since its founding in 1869 by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Between 1910 and 1913, NAWSA focused on passing legislation at the state and local levels by organizing several state referendums and tailoring the fight specifically toward men in order to gain more diversity within the Women’s Suffrage Movement. NAWSA

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\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid., 2.
was under the impression that if the movement had more male supporters then it would be more persuasive to male legislators, thus influencing them to pass a national amendment enfranchising women. According to Christine Lunardini, an American historian who specializes in social and labor movements, Carrie Chapman Catt engaged in this relaxed version of political activism, because the fight for suffrage was losing stamina and she was sure that it was not going to be won in her lifetime. Ultimately, because only six states had passed voting rights for women by 1913, this moderate approach was not particularly successful for NAWSA. Therefore, it became evident, especially to Alice Paul who joined the movement in 1912, that the struggle for the right to vote needed a change in strategy in order to achieve the passage of a national amendment.

Alice Paul, invigorated with a new perspective on the fight for women’s suffrage based on her experience with the radical Women’s Suffrage Movement in England, eagerly joined the American fight for women’s suffrage when she became involved with NAWSA in 1910. Sensing that the Movement needed a drastic change to achieve its goal, Alice Paul was eager to assume the leadership of the Congressional Committee of NAWSA in Washington D.C. Upon taking this position, she created a plan to assemble a mass march of suffragists around important government buildings including the White House, the United States Capitol Building, and the Treasury Building. These buildings were selected because they represented the most important officials in the United States government; for example, the President-elect, Woodrow Wilson, in the White House, both senators and representatives from Congress in the United States Capitol Building, and finally the nation’s money managers in the Treasury Building. The march took place on March 3, 1913, the day before President Wilson’s inauguration. It was one of the

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biggest protests in American history and brought more attention to the struggle for the vote than ever before. Despite its success in gaining not only attention to the cause but also morale, Alice Paul’s march on Washington was seen as too radical in Carrie Chapman Catt’s opinion. Therefore, the Congressional Union in Washington, D.C., under Alice Paul’s leadership and NAWSA under Carrie Chapman Catt officially became two separate organizations in 1914.7

At this point in her political career, Alice Paul established her own suffrage organization with Lucy Burns, a friend and fellow suffragist, known as the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (CU). Once Alice Paul split from NAWSA, she focused solely on leading the CU which became known as the National Woman’s Party (NWP) in 1916.8 Under Alice Paul’s leadership, the National Woman’s Party became known for its radical and militant tactics that propelled the Women’s Suffrage Movement and eventually convinced Woodrow Wilson and Congress to pass the Nineteenth Amendment. One of the most significant tactics employed by Alice Paul was a picketing campaign. On January 10, 1917, several suffragists from the NWP marched in a single-file line down Pennsylvania Avenue until they arrived in front of the gate to the White House where the newly re-elected President Woodrow Wilson resided. These women stood outside of the gate silently holding banners that stated things such as “Mr. President – What will you do for woman suffrage?”9 There were thousands of women ranging in age, class, race, both enfranchised and disenfranchised, and even from different states, who volunteered their time to stand on the picket lines in front of the White House. This kept the struggle for

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
women’s suffrage within the perspective of America’s policy makers and within the press ensuring continued attention for the movement.\textsuperscript{10}

The outbreak of the United States’ involvement in World War I marked a critical change in the public’s critique of the picketers. Prior to the war, President Wilson and the public’s attitude toward the picketers was mild and even sympathetic in the beginning of the eighteen month picketing campaign. Whereas President Wilson and passers-by had acknowledged the picketers, sometimes encouraging them or even giving them additional articles of clothing during the cold months, when the United States entered World War I the public opinion changed to that of disdain, accusing the women of being un-American. This change of opinion was the result of an even more radical form of picketing introduced by Alice Paul. Despite the United States’ involvement in World War I, the NWP continued to picket President Wilson at the White House.\textsuperscript{11} It was the opinion of the NWP that President Wilson and the United States were hypocrites for fighting in a war that promoted democracy in Europe when democracy was refused to women in the United States. Alice Paul even went as far as employing banners that personally embarrassed the Wilson Administration, referring to President Wilson as “Kaiser Wilson” and directly quoting from his speeches about the war including “We shall fight for the things that we have always held nearest to our hearts – for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their governments. – President Wilson’s War Message April 2, 1917.”\textsuperscript{12}

Alice Paul’s attack on the Wilson Administration during wartime caused not only a brief dissension of public support for the picketers but also caused a backlash with the authorities.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 106–107.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 110–111.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 114.
These attacks were seen as unpatriotic and a menace to the United States government. As a result of this, the public started to become agitated with the continued picketing of the White House, so passers-by began attacking the picketers, taking their banners and inciting violence. Furthermore, the policemen never came to the aid of the picketers and instead began to arrest them on charges like obstructing traffic. On one such occasion, Alice Paul, picketing to show that the National Woman’s Party would not relinquish its fight, was arrested and taken to Occoquan Workhouse, which was used as a prison in Virginia.13 Due to these injustices against the picketers, Alice Paul began to use even more radical tactics to prove the capability of women to exist in politics. It was in the Occoquan Workhouse that Alice Paul’s radicalism expanded and served as the most crucial role in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

The Occoquan Workhouse was a terrible environment for its inhabitants. Historian Christine Lunardini vividly describes it: “prison cells were small and dark, and the air fetid. Moreover, they were infested with a variety of animal life. Suffrage prisoner Julia Emory had to beat three rats in succession off her cot one night – a situation not uncommon in Occoquan. . . in addition to the abysmal facility conditions, authorities instituted a sustained program of physical intimidation.”14 On October 20, 1917, Alice Paul was sentenced to six months in this prison and exactly ten days later, on October 30, 1917 she began to employ her radical protest tactics again by starting a hunger strike. According to an article published by the New York Times on November 7, 1917, Alice Paul believed “that a hunger strike is a sufficient climax, for the present at least, to their efforts to force President Wilson to indorse woman suffrage by Constitutional amendment”15 and would reverse the poor treatment of the prisoners and ensure

14 Lunardini, 131.
the treatment of the suffragists as that of political prisoners. In an effort to deter the hunger strikes, prison officials began to force feed Alice Paul three times daily. She was put into solitary confinement, deprived of sleep by being awakened with bright lights periodically throughout the night, and eventually put into the psychiatric ward. By doing so, the prison and the Wilson Administration hoped that Alice Paul would be diagnosed as mentally insane, which would end the legitimacy of her leadership of the National Women’s Party.\textsuperscript{16} As Alice Paul was put under psychiatric evaluation, her opinions of President Wilson were questioned. But never once did she refer to him as a personal enemy. Thus, Alice Paul was considered sane by the psychiatrist who described Paul as a martyr and compared her determination to Joan of Arc, explaining that Paul was willing to do anything to achieve the passage of a national amendment legalizing women’s suffrage, even if that meant death.\textsuperscript{17}

The suffragists who were imprisoned at Occoquan Workhouse, including Alice Paul, used the torturous environment as leverage to propel the Suffrage Movement even further. The odds began to work in favor of these prisoners when news began to spread of their poor treatment within Occoquan. Almost immediately after this news broke, the NWP, especially Alice Paul, suddenly received sympathy and support from some of the public, the press, and politicians. This new support system began to argue for the immediate release of the suffragist prisoners which brought increased support to the NWP. After their release from prison, Alice Paul and her companions returned to picketing, but less fervent than before. However, this continued pressure of radical political activism by Alice Paul eventually caused President Wilson to reverse his opinion on women’s suffrage. After the close of World War I and his return to the United States from treaty negotiations in France; President Wilson encouraged legislatures to

\textsuperscript{16} Lunardini, 133.
pass the Nineteenth Amendment.18 Thus on January 10, 1919, from a vote of 274 to 136, the Nineteenth Amendment passed in both houses of Congress with the exact two-thirds majority requirement. On August 18, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified by the states with Tennessee as the deciding vote and on August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was officially added to the Constitution of the United States of America.19

Even though the Women’s Suffrage Movement was in danger of evaporating when Alice Paul arrived on the scene, it is because of her radical and militant political activism through picketing, hunger strikes, and relentlessness pressure on the government that reinvigorated the movement and played the most crucial role in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote. By commanding center stage of the movement and utilizing her radical tactics, Alice Paul demanded nothing less than the passage of a constitutional amendment. After achieving this goal with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Alice Paul immediately began work on equal rights for women. Unfortunately, she never saw passage of her Equal Rights Amendment. By the time of her death in 1977, Alice Paul had become not only the face of the Women’s Suffrage Movement, but also a symbol of strength, hope, and perseverance for women across the United States.

About the author

Anna Reiter is a senior majoring in history accompanied by a minor in political science. She is a member of Phi Alpha Theta and the Honors Program and will receive her BA in December, 2013.

18 Alice Paul Institute, 2.
19 Lunardini, 148–149.