# "Your Mother's Gone Away to Join the Army": The Militarization of the Women's Suffrage Movement

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When conceptualizing the word suffragette people often think of women at the turn of the century fighting for the right to vote. Often, they think of these women with banners and dressed in uniform colors. There is a reason these images have had such endurance in the public mind. Early twentieth-century suffrage is a movement that tends to have its strategies and methods minimized. For as much as we recall the event, we do not question why things were done the way they were. Spearheaded by reformers such as Alice Paul, this era of women's suffrage saw the movement shift from a series of mildly connected women's clubs to an organized, national movement. This was largely accomplished by the use of militaristic tactics such as uniforms, symbolic costumes, large parades, and protests. This militarism became a large contributor both to the suffragettes' successes and failures as a group. This devoted militancy would depersonalize the movement in some ways with stratagem becoming so important that several groups of women became excluded from the cause.

The conversation surrounding women's suffrage has shifted over the years. The mass protests and civil unrest of the 1960s meant a negative view of radical historical movements in the 1970s and 1980s. These views were popularized by scholars such as James Neuchterlein who stated, "it is a bad time for radicals and radicalism."[1] Scholar Ellen DuBois argued against this view stating that the suffrage movement could not be fully radical as it did nothing to challenge women's place of domesticity.[2] In either view,

suffrage tactics were heavily criticized, with no one questioning how this militarism developed. More recent scholars, such as Susan Goodier in her book *Women Will Vote: Winning Suffrage in New York State* and Holly McCammon in her studies of state level suffrage organizations, have begun to recognize the militant nature of the twentieth-century suffrage movement. Works like these helped cement the fact that the suffrage movement used strong strategy and militancy to their advantage. However, despite this shift, many scholars have yet to see suffrage as a fully militaristic organization. Suffragists in this period utilized many of the same tactics found in military organizations and became so involved in the militaristic mindset that it led to deviation from the original hopes and goals of the movement.

Like most activism, suffrage existed on the state level for decades before becoming a national affair. In 1867, the first women's suffrage organizations formed in Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, and New Jersey.[3] These state-level clubs provided footholds for growing a complex, interconnected movement that spanned the entire nation. As women's clubs multiplied throughout the states, reformers saw the untapped potential that these organizations could have if united. In 1890, the two largest women's suffrage associations, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), joined together to create the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), forming a unified front in the crusade of women's enfranchisement.[4]

As part of the strategic move to build support for their cause as well as get signatures for petitions, NAWSA had female representatives travel across the country bringing signs, sashes, and buttons with them. The quick pacing and rigorous nature of these tours meant that they covered a large area and reached varied crowds. In 1909, suffragist Florence Luscomb described her experience with a month-long tour. "We have spoken to 24,900 people," she recalled, "and given literature to thousands of others." Later, she added, "We held sixty-eight meetings—fifteen of them at factories."[5] These early efforts were the first vestiges of militancy in the suffrage movement. While the coordination and planning required to send out representatives and reach a large number of people was small compared to later efforts, it was still revolutionary for the organization at the time. McCammon stresses the importance of

state-level suffrage organizations. In her argument, "Much of the dynamism . . . of suffrage activism occurred at the state level, indicating the importance of studying mobilization in the states."[6] The use of the word mobilization is interesting as it relates back to the idea of militarization, as if NAWSA was mobilizing troops. This is not far from the truth—members of NAWSA were given travel orders and sent on long tours to rally support from the American people much like any other recruitment stratagem used by the United States Military.

As the suffrage movement shifted into the twentieth century, new advocates rose to prominence and pushed women's reform organizations even further down the path of rigid structure and militant organization. Alice Paul was instrumental in this change. Born in 1885, Paul was raised as a Quaker, meaning she was exposed to a society that gave women more opportunity to have positions of control. In 1907 at the age of 22, Paul moved to England, quickly joining the Women's Social and Political Union.[7] The WSPU was a militant, suffrage movement based in the UK. Their tactics could often be violent, using arson, bombings, and personal attacks on people as high up as the prime minister to achieve their goals.[8] In 1912, suffragists threw stones at the Prime Minister's house, shattering his windows.[9] Shortly after, suffragist Mary Leigh threw an axe at his head, missed, and instead cut the ear of Irish leader John Redmond.[10] This aggressive nature began to work against the movement, however, as men, looking for reasons to oppose suffrage, began to question if women could be responsible voters considering all the hostility they were using to pursue enfranchisement.[11] Witnessing the British struggle had a large influence on Paul's political activism moving forward; she saw how effective militancy could be and how it could become a hinderance. Coming back to the United States in 1910, Alice Paul ignited a passion not seen before in the suffrage movement and incorporated new militaristic tactics she picked up in England.[12]

One of the first steps in unifying a group is through appearance, something the suffragettes demonstrated when the movement adopted a loose "uniform." The first reference to dress and appearance being part of a strategy was in 1910.[13] After Gabrielle Stewart Mulliner, famous lawyer and women's rights activist, described the women sent to protest in Washington as "frumpy,"

fellow lawyer and activist Inez Millholland stated that it "might be good politics for those in suffrage ranks to put their most attractive members forward."[14] In the years afterward, protesting suffragists took to wearing the same thing when together to create a unified presence. The outfit consisted of a long white dress accented by the violet and gold sashes famous to the movement. While this uniform may seem simple, there was strategy behind the choices. The white dresses were meant to serve as a reminder of suffragists' purity and innocence—counteracting the stereotypes of all suffragists being harsh and unwomanly. The violet was meant to stand for the loyalty felt towards the United States while the gold was symbolic of the hope felt for the future of the women's cause.[15] Even the order of the color had meaning, with the initials for Gold, White, Violet (GWV) standing for Give Women the Vote.[16] Much like military uniforms, this look was used to create an impression of suffragists as serious, well put-together women.

One of the reasons why these impressions were important was because of the representation of suffragists in media. Often ridiculed for being too masculine in dress, suffragists had to fight to be taken seriously. This scorn had been going on since the beginning of the women's rights movement with clergy often complaining about the evils of women in reform. They believed a true woman had "No coarseness . . . mingled with her speech, no boisterousness with her zeal. Her feelings, her sensibilities, her tastes were all characterized by a gentleness and delicacy seldom surpassed."[17] Obviously the authors of such sentiments did not approve of women's loud and "coarse" support of enfranchisement. Circa 1910, postcards belittling the appearance and dress of suffragists began to gain popularity - another contributing factor to a shift in suffragists' appearance at that time. One of these political cartoons is shown in Appendix A. Here, a woman dressed in brightly colored trousers is being turned away by a minister from a woman's only meeting. The caption reads, "Not in These Trousers!"[18] The goal of these cartoons was to deny women in the suffrage movement their femininity. As women in this era used women's perceived morality and religious superiority to men as reasoning to allow them to vote, these negative views of outspoken women were a genuine threat to the movement. As a result, the chosen uniform of modest, nationalistic dresses and

colors served to counteract ideas of suffragists being masculine and immoral.

Similar to establishing a suffrage uniform, nationalistic and war-like symbolism were also used by suffragists to link their cause to the bravery of warriors and the nationalistic pride seen commonly in military groups. In many suffrage parades and events, women would dress in historical or symbolic costumes to stir up support for the cause. One of the most remembered of these costumes was Joan of Arc, who not only served as a symbol of female empowerment but as a woman of action. As early as 1909, English suffragettes had begun dressing as Joan of Arc in their parades to show they were always ready for battle.[19] Appendix B shows an example of one such costume. In the photo, Miss Elsie Howey is dressed as Joan and riding a white horse. She is fully bedecked in armor and raising a flag high above her head.[20] American suffragists soon followed suit, adopting Joan as a symbol of their movement as well. Costumes such as these alluded to the idea that women were going to fight for their beliefs—just as if it were a war.

Another common costume was that of "Columbia." Columbia was the name of an American mascot, a woman draped in the colors of the American flag and normally seen carrying a sword and shield. This goddess figure had been used in political illustrations for decades by the time that suffragettes adopted her, so she would have been easily recognizable as a symbol of the American spirit and revolution. In a way, Lady Columbia served as the suffrage movement's Uncle Sam, which is fitting as they often appeared together in early Army posters.[21] In 1913, actress Hedwig Reicher donned the attire of Lady Columbia, with vaguely roman armor, a staff bearing the bald eagle, and a cape made of the American flag (Appendix C).[22] Lady Columbia likened the suffrage movement to wars such as the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Connecting the fight for suffrage to war helped women in the reform movement show this was not a matter to be taken lightly.

Part of the militarized strategy of suffragists was spreading their message and presenting a strong front. This effect was achieved through grand parades and exhibitions. These parades varied in size, but they often utilized the aforementioned suffragist uniform, large numbers of banners, and even music. Marching music is another point in which military procession and suffrage protest converge. In

the early 1910s, songs such as "Damen Racht" (Yiddish for "Women's Rights"), and "The March of the Women" were popular.[23] These songs kept time and unison for parading women and served as a rallying cry for parade participants.

In response to such marching songs, anti-suffragists began to create their own music meant to mimic and belittle suffragists. Yet, even in their taunting they could not deny how determined suffragists had become. In these anti-suffragist songs, the main point of contention was often how strict and militant suffragists could be. A prime example of this is the 1913 song "Your Mother's Gone Away to Join the Army," which included lines such as, "Hear the tramp of their feet as they come down the street / gee those girlies look sweet they're all dressed up so neat / your dear old ma just took a fighter's place."[24] This shows that even those opposing suffrage could not deny how seriously its participants took the cause. Songs like these prove militaristic strategies were having the desired effect; they were gaining notice.

Perhaps one of the boldest moves made by early twentieth century suffragists was the first Women's Suffrage parade held in Washington D.C. In 1913, Paul organized more than 5,000 participants to march down Pennsylvania Avenue in front of large crowds.[25] Notably, the event occurred the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, placing pressure on his new administration to finally address demands for female enfranchisement.[26] The photo seen in Appendix D shows this procession; in it there is a combination of all the aspects of militarization mentioned previously. All marching women wear matching clothes, and although the image is in black-and-white, one can presume, they are adorned in suffrage colors. At the front of the parade is Inez Millholland, with a star meant to symbolize hope in her crown—literally leading the women into a new age.[27] This parade marked the first time the women's reform movement appealed to the federal level. Working toward the goal of a federal amendment meant that suffragists would have to stand strong in ways they never had before.

As suffrage parades became more common, new forms of protest were just around the corner for women. The first ever political pageant held outside of the White House was organized by Alice Paul.[28] Suffragists stayed posted outside of the White House armed with picket signs, often standing silent as if in a vigil.

Woodrow Wilson's dismissal of female enfranchisement spurred Paul to ensure he could not look out his window without being reminded of the women's reform movement. Women stood day and night in front of the home of the president for a non-continuous period that spanned two and a half years.[29] A photo found in Appendix E shows a group of Alice Paul's "Silent Sentinels" or White House picketers. One of the women holds a sign reading, "Mr. President How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty," while the other women hold suffrage banners.[30] The name "silent sentinel" was coined firstly from the military term sentinel, or a soldier on watch, and secondly from their often very quiet nature. This dedication and organization required massive amounts of planning and great personal fortitude as many of the protesters were exposed to harsh critique and harassment.[31] These protesters were organized with militant accuracy and worked in shifts guarding the hope of their cause.

The biggest challenge to these silent sentinels would prove, not only how seriously these female suffragists were, but how abusive opponents of the movement could be. In 1917, protestors outside of the White House began to be arrested. The reason given to them was that they were blocking traffic. In the next months over 218 women were arrested with 97 being incarcerated.[32] While these women faced abominable conditions and treatment, they persisted in their cause. Alice Paul herself was arrested and, instead of sitting idle, organized a hunger strike.[33] As women began to follow her lead, wardens made an example of her by force-feeding her. Alice Paul was no stranger to the experience of force-feeding, having experienced it during her time in the English prison Halloway. She described the experience as follows, "Each day I was wrapped in blankets and taken to another cell to be fed, the food being injected through my nostrils. During this operation the largest wardress in Halloway sat astride my knees, holding my shoulder down to keep me from bending forward. Two other wardresses sat on either side and held my arms."[34] The horrors faced by suffragettes left many physically ill, and Paul pushed for the prisoners to be recognized as political prisoners of war even from her own cell.[35]

Instead of letting such treatment slow their movement suffragists wore prison sentences like a badge of honor. Portraits of suffragettes in their prison uniforms were not uncommon. The

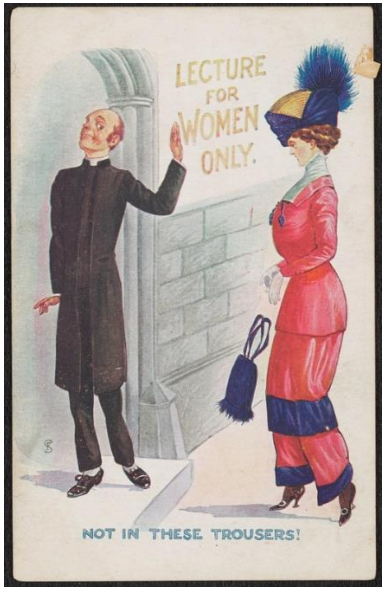
photo in Appendix F shows Lucy Branham speaking in front of a crowd of suffragettes in 1919. For the occasion she has donned her prison uniform complete with a suffrage sash.[36] Ill treatment of female prisoners was soon used as leverage against members of Congress, painting a bad image of those who claimed to protect women and their place in society. The use of prison stories by suffragists is reminiscent of the military's use of war stories to drum up support and excitement about joining the movement. It shows that these women were willing to put themselves in harm's way to see the realization of their cause.

Unfortunately, not all women were allowed to be involved in the suffrage ranks to the same extent. The suffragists' strategy of militarization led some suffrage reformers to abandon their goal to ensure that *all* women had the right to vote. Leaders in the suffrage movement began to worry too much about the number of white supporters they had and tried to retain all of them. The most famous instance of suffragist-related discrimination occurred when Ida B. Wells, the famous civil rights and women's rights activist, was told that she could not march next to the other suffragettes in the 1913 Pennsylvania Avenue parade because of the color of her skin. Worried about losing support in southern states, Alice Paul was hesitant to publicly show her support of both white and black enfranchisement leading to worries of racial exclusion in the parade.[37] Anna Howard Shaw, president of NAWSA, sent a telegram to Paul after hearing about the situation stating that racial prejudice did not align with the organization's policies and ordered that "all colored women who wish to march shall be accorded every service given to other marchers."[38] Despite this, black suffragettes were still grouped together and moved to the sidelines in parade processions. Ida B. Wells and Nellie Quander, an activist who had brought a group of suffragettes from Howard University, protested their placement and moved forward to walk shoulder to shoulder with their fellow reformers.[39] Ultimately, black and white women would march together on March 3, 1913, but the circumstances surrounding the event showed the increasing tensions in the group and the discrimination so often faced by black women's rights activists at the hands of white movement leaders.

The early twentieth century was a time of great change for the women's suffrage movement. Coming from a group of state-level

organizations to a large, interconnected organization spanning the entire country. Suffragists used militancy to aid in their fight for enfranchisement with uniformity, resistance, and resiliency being the attributes that led them to success. Suffrage leaders' tactics reflect a full-blown militaristic action. While aspects of this militarism helped propel the movement, they also contributed to growing racial prejudice in the group and loss of focus. It may be easy to downplay such a movement, but these women were willing to fight and die for their cause—they weighed it against their own lives.

# Appendix




A

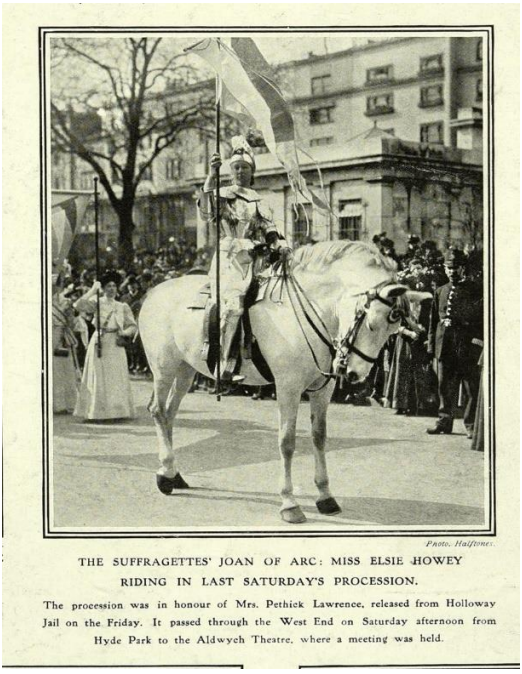


*Photo. Halftone.*

THE SUFFRAGETTES' JOAN OF ARC: MISS ELSIE HOWEY RIDING IN LAST SATURDAY'S PROCESSION.

The procession was in honour of Mrs. Pethick Lawrence, released from Holloway Jail on the Friday. It passed through the West End on Saturday afternoon from Hyde Park to the Aldwych Theatre, where a meeting was held.

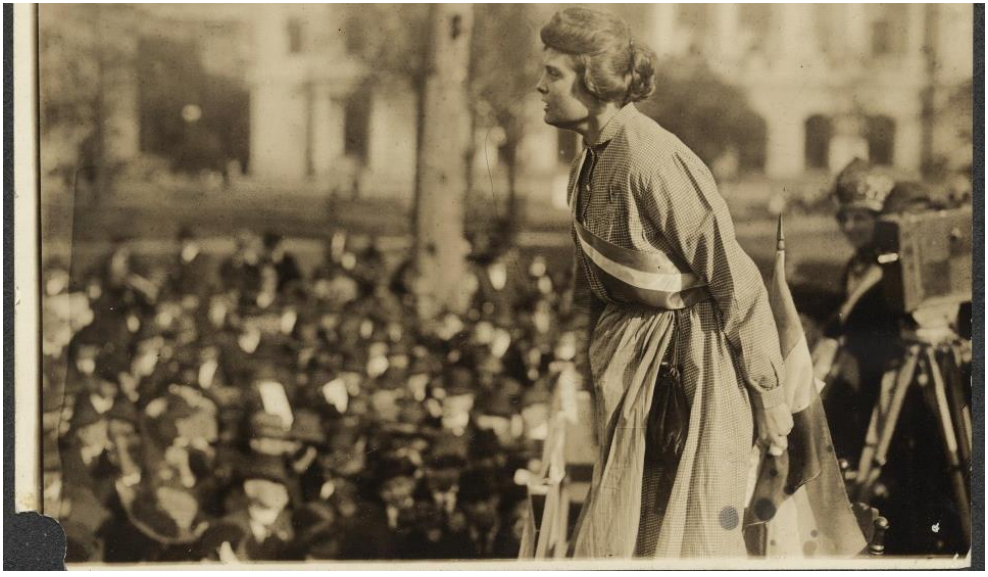
B

C


WOMEN
VOTE
WE DEMAND AN AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES ENFRANCHISING THE WOMEN OF THIS COUNTRY

D


E



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# Notes

[1] Neuchterlein, 25.
[2] DuBois, 63-71.
[3] McCammon," 452.
[4] "The National American Woman Suffrage Association."
[5] Luscomb, 119- 120.
[6] McCammon, 453- 454
[7] Graham, 666.
[8] Lance, 52.
[9] "Suffragist Outrages," 8.
[10] "The Suffragist Outrages," 10.
[11] Wallace.
[12] Graham, 666.
[13] Goodier, 119.
[14] Goodier, 119.
[15] Nuñez-Franklin.
[16] *Suffrage in 60 Seconds.*
[17] Fulton, 39-40.
[18] Bamforth & Co.
[19] "The Suffragette's Joan of Arc."
[20] "The Suffragette's Joan of Arc," 1909.
[21] Shane.
[22] "German Actress Hedwig Reicher."
[23] "Songs of Women's Suffrage" and "Music in the Women's Suffrage Movement."
[24] Gray.
[25] Madsen, 283.
[26] Madsen, 283.
[27] "Women Marching in Suffrage Parade."
[28] Madsen, 290.
[29] Errick.
[30] Harris and Ewing.
[31] Madsen, 301.
[32]Southard, 409.
[33] Graham, 676.
[34] National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection.
[35] "Who was Alice Paul?"
[36] Lucy Branham in Occoquan Prison Dress.
[37] "Parade Planning Exposes Racial Divides."
[38] Shaw.
[39] Madsen, 305.

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