

Alice Paul: Warrior for Women's Equality



She went to England to study social work, although she believed that it “was not doing much good in the world.” While studying at the London School of Economics, she met the militant English suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst, who introduced Paul to militant protest tactics. Paul became one of Pankhurst’s devoted lieutenants and was imprisoned three times.

Returning home in 1910, Paul earned a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania on the legal position of women. She also organized suffrage parades and spectacles. In 1912, she became co-chair of the Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the leading American suffrage organization. Paul and others on the Committee worked to achieve a federal constitutional amendment, in contrast to NAWSA’s laborious strategy of achieving suffrage state by state.



Alice Paul served as chairman of the Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1913, director of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, and director of the National Woman's Party. She served six prison terms for woman suffrage.

Photo by Edmonston, Records of the National Woman's Party, Library of Congress

Alice Paul (1885-1977) was a tough, dedicated feminist who led the final push to achieve women’s suffrage in the United States. Her militant tactics, which included picketing the White House and staging hunger strikes in prison, galvanized public attention and transformed the suffrage movement from a genteel cause into a fierce crusade.

Paul was born in Mount Laurel, N.J. Her Quaker family promoted education, public service, and social activism (her grandfather was a president of Rutgers University). Her mother, who shared the Quaker view of women’s equality, took Alice to local women’s suffrage meetings.

At Quaker schools, Alice embraced nonviolent civil disobedience. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Swarthmore College. Like many young, college-educated women, she worked at a New York City settlement house which sponsored classes and job training for new immigrants.

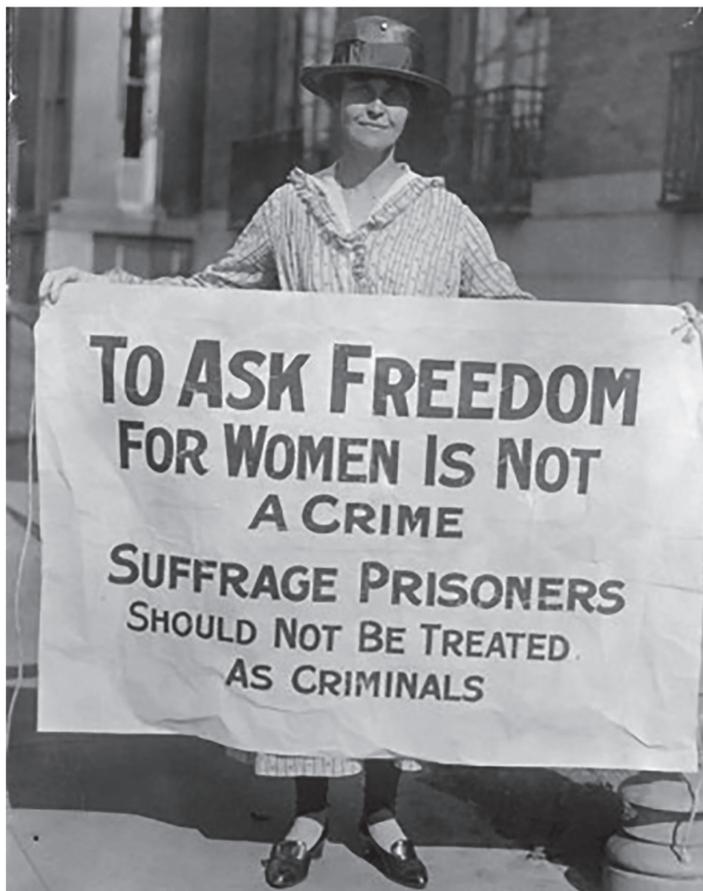
The First Women's March on Washington in 1913

In Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913, on the eve of Woodrow Wilson’s presidential inauguration, Paul organized a parade of 7,000 suffragists (including men). Crowds jeered and assaulted the marchers, and federal troops had to quell the violence. But the publicity put the suffrage cause on the nation’s radar.

Impatient with NAWSA’s slow progress, Paul quit and reorganized the Congressional Committee as the National Woman’s Party (NWP). Its members were younger and embraced Paul’s commitment to militance. She inspired in them an impatience to claim their rights, and urged them to risk their personal freedom.



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Suffragist Mary Winsor holding a banner that reads: "To Ask Freedom for Women is Not a Crime. Suffrage Prisoners Should Not be Treated as Criminals," circa November 1917.

When American entry into World War I overshadowed attention on suffrage, Paul enlisted "Silent Sentinels" to picket the White House. In January 1917, the NWP staged the first political protest, picketing at the White House. These women carried banners that read, "Mr. President, what will you do for woman suffrage?"

This was the first time that an organized group had protested in front of the White House, and the police and public jeered and assaulted the women. The suffragists—and not the unruly mobs—were arrested, tried, and sent to the notorious Occoquan Work House in Virginia. The women were held in isolation in filthy cells and were given moldy, worm-infested food.

Paul and many others went on a hunger strike to declare that they were political prisoners and not criminals. They were brutalized and force fed through tubes pushed down their noses. Paul was even isolated in the psychiatric ward. There, a psychiatrist pronounced her sane and said she had "a spirit...like Joan of Arc's, and it is useless to try to change her."

Paul and her fellow prisoners smuggled out letters about their abusive treatment and they were eventually released. Paul resumed her work on behalf of a Constitutional women's suffrage amendment.

Victory, but not rest

Finally, in June 1919, the U.S. Senate passed the federal women's suffrage amendment. In the following months, the 36 states required by the Constitution ratified the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote.

Paul now turned to achieving passage of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Her draft simply said, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States." She clashed with other women's rights activists who favored protective legislation to regulate women's working hours and conditions. Paul objected to any laws that did not apply to both sexes.



Alice Paul

Until the end of her life, she worked tirelessly to pass the ERA. In 1938, she founded the World Woman's party, which helped insert the principle of equal rights for women in the preamble to the United Nations charter in 1939. Paul also urged the U.S. Congress to prohibit gender discrimination in the Civil Rights Act that it passed in 1964.

Alice Paul died in 1977 at the age of ninety-two. Her life spanned the struggle for a Constitutional suffrage amendment and the present-day women's movement. She could be brusque, domineering, and demanding, and she had little patience for other viewpoints. But, in her passionate commitment to achieving political and legal equality for women, she was peerless.



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