**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Jennifer Keene – Women’s Suffrage** (22m 54s)

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**3 speakers** (Announcer, Libby O'Connell, Jennifer Keene)

**[0:00:11]**

**Announcer**: Welcome to the How World War One Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Hi everybody. I'm Libby O'Connell and I'm delighted to have as a guest today, Jennifer Keene. She's Dean at Wilkinson College, and professor of history at Chapman University. So welcome Jennifer. I'm so glad you can join us.

**[0:00:41]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**[0:00:43]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Today's theme is women in World War One. Could you give us a brief background on the pre World War One suffrage movement? That's going to be our focus here and I was wondering if you could just help set it up.

**[0:00:59]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Sure, absolutely. So in the years preceeding The First World War, the suffrage movement was really at a crossroads. From 1896 to 1910 no new states had given women the vote. And so there was a sense that the movement had to readjust and change to continue to progress. And what we see at the national level is some divisions arising within the movement, and they really arise between two key organizations. The National American Women's Suffrage Association, which had been the predominant suffrage organizations since 1890, and then a newcomer on the scene, the National Women's Party, and these organizations had different leaders who had different ideas about how to advance the cause. On the side of NAWSA, we had Carrie Chapman Catt, who became president in 1915, and really readjusted, recalibrated away from a state by state approach to really focusing on a federal amendment. The National Women's Party, which was run by Alice Paul, agreed with this tactic of a federal amendment, but of course had a very different idea about how to approach it. So Catt focused on really developing a powerhouse lobbying organization. One that was centrally controlled, had good publicity, that developed a strong lobbying campaign with individual congressmen, sometimes lobbied against anti suffrage congressmen, but also tried to develop a good relationship with Woodrow Wilson. They really just were using traditional lobbying power politic techniques. Alice Paul, however, was a militant, and she had trained with British suffragists. She has learned about the power of collective action, of demonstrations, of really literally putting your body on the line to fight for suffrage. And she came back to the United States and tried to introduce those tactics within NAWSA, found it was not well received, and so went on to found her own organization. And so her tactics were very militant and they were about demonstrations, they were about calling people out as being hypocrites, really being very confrontational. And so this is really where the movement was by the time of the First World War.

**[0:03:01]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Can you tell us a little bit about the type of demonstrations that Alice Paul and her group at the National Women's Party would get involved in?

**[0:03:09]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Absolutely. So one important thing that Alice Paul initiated, while she was still a part of NAWSA was a sufferage parade in Washington, D.C. In 1913, on the eve of Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. And this was kind of typical of the way that she really wanted to create street demonstrations, and almost make it impossible for the media to ignore the suffrage movement. And then in January of 1917, which is before the United States actually enters the First World War, she pioneers this idea of picketing the White House. And now we're very accustomed to that. We expect people to do this. But this was the first time in American history that anybody had actually taken this type of approach, and they became called the silent sentinels because they were really well dressed, middle-class women simply standing in front of the White House holding banners. And the first banners said, "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?" Her tendency over time became to really lift phrases from Woodrow Wilson's speeches to basically be calling him out in public about the need to grant women the vote.

**[0:04:14]**

**Libby O'Connell**: What was the press response to that? Was the popular press supporting it, or was everybody shocked? What were the different responses?

**[0:04:22]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So in January of 1917, people are irritated by it, but it's actually also fairly benign. It doesn't generate the kind of controversy and attention that Alice Paul had hoped. It's when America enters the war and the pickets still stand. That's when the controversy really begins, because then it appears that in fact these picketers are unpatriotic and disloyal because they're not putting aside their special cause to join in the war effort. And Alice Paul really had that idea that my cause is suffrage, I don't care about the war, the war is not my issue. And then they begin pulling in these phrases from Wilson's war time speeches, again, really upping their confrontational approach. And these pickets, once America had declared war, became very controversial. And they were attacked in the press, they were physically attacked by bystanders. The police did nothing. Then they were arrested for obstructing traffic in a public way. Basically the implication was that people couldn't walk on the sidewalk because they were standing there. They were sentenced to work houses. When they arrived in there, many of them went on hunger strikes. Then they were force fed, put in solitary confinement, often beaten. And this mistreatment of these educated white women in prison became new fodder for Alice Paul and the National Women's Party to publicize just how far and what extreme measures the administration was using to try to silence them. And they called themselves political prisoners, that they were being mistreated because of their political views. And so this attempt to silence them really backfired because Alice Paul was very adept at creating good publicity around her cause, and generated a sort of backlash against Wilson for the way that he was treating them. So this defiant attitude and her demonstrations, she really understood the moment of the war as a moment to gain the public attention for suffrage. But I should point out that Carrie Chapman Catt also saw the war as a good moment for suffrage, but had a very different approach.

**[0:06:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, what was her approach then?

**[0:06:28]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So Carrie Chapman Catt was almost the exact opposite, that she counseled the suffragists to join in the war effort fully. To volunteer for every possible opportunity, to sell liberty bonds, roll bandages for the Red Cross, be on all the community wartime committees, lead food conservation efforts. But while they did this, to do it as suffragist, meaning that they came in with their sashes, with their buttons, with their literature, and really demonstrated and publicized the fact that the suffrage movement was patriotic, loyal, and was showing visibly that the country could not fight this war without the help of women. And this for Carrie Chapman Catt became a rhetorical point. Whereas for Paul, it was, look at what a hypocrite Wilson is. He says this is a war for democracy, but then he refuses to support women as full fledged citizens by supporting their federal amendment for the right to vote. And then Catt says, "Look, you can't fight this war without women. It's a total war. And if women were not doing all of these things, the war effort could not succeed." And so Catt said, "Here you are putting on women all the responsibilities of citizenship, but denying them full rights." And so both of them with different tactics used the wartime time moment as an opportunity to point out why women should in fact have the right to vote and why the correct path to giving women the right to vote was through a federal amendment to the constitution.

**[0:08:01]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Now let's put that on hold for a minute to one side. I'm going to jump backwards a little bit and then we're going to return to that because I think you're making some really important points about the next steps in the response to the suffrage movement. Actually at the dawn of the 20th century, it was pretty clear that there were several states had already granted the right to suffrage to women. Can you talk a little bit about the geographical differences, and how they were shaped?

**[0:08:25]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Yes. With the state-by-state approach that the suffrage movement had embraced initially, there was a clear geographical distribution in the states that were willing to grant women the right to vote versus the ones that weren't. And the states that primarily granted women the right to vote came in the west. And it wasn't until 1917, so really we're at war when this happens, that New York grants women the suffrage. And so this idea that female suffrage was more attainable and more popular in the west has been one of these characteristics of how American women get the right to vote that has really fascinated historians and I can honestly say it's easier to observe this phenomenon than to explain it. So there are some explanations that scholars have offered about why we seem to see the western states embracing suffrage more readily than the eastern states. And some of it has to do with the political culture in the west, that these are new societies, new governments that are being formed. And you see a lot of innovation in the west that you don't see in the east during this time. A lot of the progressive era reforms like secret ballots and referendum and recall and initiatives on the ballot. All of these progressive electoral reforms are also more popular in the west than in the east. So that's one kind of explanation.

**[0:09:45]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Didn't they also want to welcome more women to the states?

**[0:09:48]**

**Jennifer Keene**: It's a bit of an old saw that one are the reasons that women in the west got the vote before women in the east is because of the economic power that they wielded. It is true that women were more likely to run businesses in the west, and many women had come out as homesteaders, and that did give them a certain type of economic clout in the west that they didn't have in the east. And so certainly that could be seen as a contributory factor, but really, probably what's more important in terms of the role that women themselves played in winning the right to vote in the west was the effectiveness of suffrage organizations in the west. That they just organized better campaigns, they were better funded, they seem to have better strategies. And so, besides the sort of general political culture or even their economic clout, the fact that they were more effectively organized as lobbying groups is also often cited as a reason. And then, thinking about the political climate in the west, a newer interpretation that's been gaining favor is the idea that unlike in the east where, especially in urban areas, political machines were well established and unlike in the south where we had the solid south, in the west, there was still a fluidity in terms of people's party affiliation, and the elections were quite competitive. And in this competitive environment, male politicians could see the advantage of developing new constituencies and new pools of voters. And so in agreeing or supporting suffrage, the idea that men saw an advantage in women voting because these might be votes that came to them or came to their party, that that also played a role as well. And that in places where the female vote did not really seem to politicians to be a particular advantage or that they didn't really need it to keep power, that there was less interest in it. So like I say, it's still an open question open for interpretation, but there's no doubt that that geographical divide is quite pronounced.

**[0:11:45]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Now some politicians do not welcome women of color as part of the suffrage movement, even though they may have had mixed feelings about it white women voting. Can you talk a little bit about racism and its role in denying women the right to vote?

**[0:11:59]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Yes. So the fact of racism and the fear that by granting women the right to vote, you were going to reopen the question of the place of African Americans and especially African American voting in American society. This was a big fear, probably is not a surprise, in the south. And this was one of the reasons for the suffrage movement's embrace of the state's rights approach for so long. Even when it became clear that it was not working anymore, there were still many suffrage organizations in the solid south that really rejected the notion of switching to a federal amendment, because the fear was that once you had a federal amendment, which would give the federal government enforcement power of that right, that this would open the door to the federal government coming into the south and demanding that southern societies let all women vote because that's what the amendment says and then that in turn might lead to questions about the 15th amendment not being enforced and how this could become this Pandora's box. So the notion that expanding suffrage through an amendment process that was open would really destabilize the way that Jim Crow had disenfranchised African-Americans. This was a real dilemma for the suffrage movement. It really created a dance for them in a sort of sense. The leaders of the suffrage movement did not want to address this issue. There were some African American women who participated in the suffrage movement, but for the most part, both Paul and Catt were willing to accept the rights of states to limit the franchise. They weren't trying to suggest that every single person should vote and they could use rhetoric to say, "Well, you're letting uneducated immigrant men who don't even speak English and whose loyalty to this country is questioned vote. And yet here you have white college educated middle-class women and you deny them the suffrage." So there's almost in some of this rhetoric, the implication that your gender should not be the determinant factor, but there could be other factors by which you determine a person does not have the qualifications to vote. So they are not saying you shouldn't have any right to qualify, just the qualification should not be based on gender. And so they were capable of embracing what we would consider racially tinged and xenophobic, and classist arguments to make their case. So racism was a huge factor in this discussion. And it was one of the reasons why when it came to ratification, basically the entire south rejected the 19th amendment.

**[0:14:32]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I think if you do an overlay of the Civil Rights Act with the vote on the women's suffrage, it's pretty exact...

**[0:14:39]**

**Jennifer Keene**: That's right. Exactly, exactly. Any attempt to expand the franchise in the south is immediately suspect because it's considered whether it's explicit in the part of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 or implicit in the sense of the 19th amendment, that that's where the state's rights argument comes out with a vengeance.

**[0:14:58]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Earlier we were talking about the divisions within the suffrage movement, and the different approaches to getting women's right to vote. We also talked about how the press pushed back on both of those sides point of view in terms of the importance of getting the right to vote. How does World War One provide a platform to change this conversation? Why does suffrage become something to be a mind changer for those who had been opposed to it before with women's actions in World War One.

**[0:15:32]**

**Jennifer Keene**: There's no doubt that Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric, his emphasis on the importance of democracy of this is a war to make the world safe for democracy. As democracy, as the wave of the future really opens up an opportunity for suffragists to make their own claims on this set of goals that Woodrow Wilson has given the nation as it enters World War One. And so it becomes almost too easy to point out that while we say that this is a war for democracy, there is huge numbers of women who are denied the franchise and also it allows a sort of comparative perspective to arise. The sense that the Russian Revolution, the first Russian Revolution, not the Bolshevik one, but the one that proceeds it, which is a democratic revolution, immediately women are granted the right to vote by the new Russian Duma. Britain seems to be making some promises to its women about enlarging the franchise. It suddenly seems that when Wilson talks about America being on the cusp of world leadership and leading this wave of democratic change throughout the world, that we are actually a step behind. So that becomes one powerful rhetorical point. But the other is that both organizations, and both Carrie Chapman Catt and Alice Paul see an opportunity to garner press attention that had been difficult to achieve before. So Carrie Chapman Catt works very closely with the Committee on Public Information, which is the publicity agency that's created to really explain to Americans what the war is all about. Through that she has avenues to power. She's able to really publicize all of the things that her group, which is now considered the more moderate suffrage organization are doing on behalf of suffrage. And she also cultivates a very strong relationship with Woodrow Wilson and she meets with him regularly and he comes out in favor of the New York State Referendum because it's in keeping with his initial support of the state's rights approach. And instead of the Alice Paul approach, which is to berate him for not [inaudible] favor of a federal amendment, she praises him and she says, "Thank you for all your support. We know it made a difference. We know it was helpful," and tries to cajole him into supporting a federal amendment. And then of course the flip side is Alice Paul who's standing outside the gates of the White House or her group is, I mean obviously she's not just doing it by herself, and their banners and the controversy and the arrests, and all the publicity that gets generated around that. And Catt understands that that publicity is in a sense working, she tries to censor press coverage of Alice Paul's demonstrations rather unsuccessfully because of course they're just too good in terms of the fodder that they provide for news reporters. But Catt is convinced that Alice Paul is hurting the cause. She thinks that Wilson probably would have come around sooner to a federal amendment if Paul was not standing outside the White House. And of course Paul felt the other way, that she could just have been allowed free reign if Catt wasn't so conciliatory that it would've come sooner. But the end result is that Wilson does come out in favor of a federal amendment. And that is an important, at least symbolic moment for the suffrage movement, because it's the first president that has actually said, "Yes, a federal amendment is the way to go." And he's a southerner who's reversed course, who's abandoned the state's rights approach. And that is significant. And he couches his change of heart in the rhetoric of the war that basically he even says, "We've 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." And so he really now acknowledges Catt's point that we're demanding women participate, but we don't give them the rights. And I've said this is a war for democracy, and I should stick by this. So there's again scholars debate who had the most influence on Wilson. Was it Catt's approach or Paul's approach or was it the combination? I mean Catt only looks moderate because of what Alice Paul is doing. In another context she might look like the radical. But the end result is that Wilson comes out in favor and that is a big, big moment.

**[0:19:46]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So the final question on this is going to be about what happens next. The suffrage amendment is passed in Congress and then goes out to the states to be ratified.

**[0:19:56]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Yes. So this is one of the ironies for the suffrage movement. They have this dramatic turn after 1915 where really both wings, the moderates and the radicals, agree that the federal amendment is the way to go. They get the amendment passed and then it has to be ratified. So they have to go back to a state by state approach, right? Because now they have to basically go into all these states and one by one have these locally based campaigns. And here it where it's probably worth emphasizing something I didn't say earlier was that although these are national organizations and I've been focusing on the national leadership, both of these suffrage organizations had community level groups as well. They had to have dedicated local committees and organizations and chapters, otherwise the ratification process could not happen. The ratification process goes relatively quickly and then it comes down to Tennessee. And this does not look good because this is a southern state. And the idea that we've just been talking about how the south is not in favor of the federal amendment. So there is a lot of pessimism within suffrage circles about what's going to happen. And in Tennessee, the governor calls a special session of a state legislature just to deal with ratification. There is one vote and the vote is deadlocked and they say, "Okay, we're going to have another vote just to see if anybody is going to change their minds." And then there's one state legislator at the very last minute decides to change his vote. And he decides to change it because his mother was an ardent suffragist and he had told her, "I can't vote for this because my constituencies are against it, but I promise you that if it comes to a deadlock and my vote is the difference between it happening and not happening, I will change my mind." That's exactly what happens. He ends up voting for the amendment and that is the vote that makes it a constitutional amendment. And so I love that story because it just goes to show you that children should always listen to their mothers.

**[0:22:02]**

**Libby O'Connell**: That's a wonderful story. We're going to have to end on that, but thank you so much for sharing this wealth of information.

**[0:22:10]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Thank you.

**[0:22:10]**

**Libby O'Connell**: And I am so pleased we were able to get that wonderful story of the ratification in at the end.

**[0:22:15]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Great. Thank you so much for having me.

**[0:22:17]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Enjoyed every minute. Thank you, Jennifer. Signing off now. This is Libby O'Connell. This was Women in World War One.

**[0:22:27]**

**Speaker 1**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War One Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the collaboration of the US World War One Centennial Commission, the Doughboy Foundation, the National World War One Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

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