



Jeannette Rankin: Nothing Left but My Integrity

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

‘What one decides to do in crisis depends on one’s philosophy of life, and that philosophy cannot be changed by an incident. If one hasn’t any philosophy in crises, others make the decision.’ – Jeannette Rankin

Jeannette Rankin, born in 1880, was the eldest of six children in a wealthy and prominent family in Montana. She graduated from Montana State University with a bachelor’s degree in biology, and then attended the New York School of Philanthropy. A woman of many interests, she considered careers in dress making, furniture design, and, after seeing slums in Boston, social work.

She soon became involved in a multitude of reform causes, including women’s suffrage, pacifism, civil rights, social welfare programs for women and children, and opposition to child labor. She worked in poor areas of San Francisco, New York, and Washington and was a professional lobbyist for the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Rankin later became the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Furthermore, she was the only woman to cast a congressional vote in favor of women’s suffrage, and the only member of Congress to have voted against the U.S. entry into both World Wars.

She saw her pacifism as a natural outgrowth of her commitment to women’s rights. Influenced by Mohandas Gandhi and Jane Addams, she believed that women were naturally more inclined to peace than men were, and if women participated more fully in civic and political life, there would be fewer wars. Throughout her lifetime, Rankin consistently upheld her convictions, even when they were unpopular and led to bitter criticism.

NARRATIVE

In 1916, women lacked the right to vote in 10 states. The Great War had started two years earlier in Europe, and Jeannette Rankin was concerned that the United States might allow itself to be pulled into that conflict. If she were in Congress, she reasoned, she would be in a position to take a stand both for women’s suffrage and against the war. Rankin’s brother, Wellington, financed and managed her campaign for Congress, in which she advocated women’s suffrage, social welfare, and staying out of Europe’s troubles. Her pacifism was apparent throughout the campaign; at one point, she asserted, “If they are going to have war, they ought to take the old men and leave the young to propagate the race.”

Wellington’s position in the Montana Republican Party helped assure Rankin the victory. Upon word of her victory, Rankin stated, “I may be the first woman member of Congress, but

NARRATIVE

I won't be the last." Within a short time of taking her seat in Congress, she was one of 57 representatives who voted against the U.S. declaration of war on Germany. Her vote stance brought vehement criticism, even though her constituents in Montana largely opposed the war. Her detractors denounced her as disloyal, and others asserted that she had proven that women were too fearful to participate in politics. Her suffragist colleagues turned against her because they thought her stand on the war would harm the chances of a constitutional amendment that gave women the right to vote.

However, Rankin continued to advocate woman suffrage. In 1918 she opened the very first House debate on the subject by asking, "How shall we answer the challenge, gentlemen? How shall we explain to them the meaning of democracy if the same Congress that voted to make the world safe for democracy refuses to give this small measure of democracy to the women of our country?"

Rankin ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1918, and then turned her attention to additional efforts for women's rights and pacifism, both within the U.S. and on the world stage. She joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and founded the Georgia Peace Society. She served on the National Council for the Prevention of War, the National Consumers' League, and lobbied Congress to pass various types of social welfare legislation.

By 1939, Europe was once again entangled in war. Rankin ran for Congress in 1940 specifically so she would be in position to vote against America's involvement in it. She won her seat with 54% of the vote and, keeping her campaign promise, introduced several resolutions opposing U.S. entry into the war. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt appeared before a joint session of Congress to ask for a declaration of war. The nation's radio networks had reporters on the scene who recorded the president's speech. Then, the reporter for the Mutual Network, in an inadvertent violation of House rules, continued to record the session in the only live radio broadcast of a regular session of Congress up to that time.

In the recording, Rankin's voice can be heard as she repeatedly tried to gain recognition to speak. House Speaker Sam Rayburn recognized other representatives, all of whom favored a declaration of war against Japan, but he resolutely refused to recognize Rankin and declared her out of order. Congressional aides and spectators tried to persuade Rankin to vote for the war, or at least to abstain. She was visibly upset as she continued to fight for her right to speak. But she was just as unyielding in her determination to firmly say "no" in the roll call vote—to a chorus of hisses and boos. The resolution in favor of war passed the House with a vote of 388-1. Rankin explained her position: "As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else." An angry mob of spectators followed Rankin out of the Capitol and she sought refuge in a phone booth while waiting for the Capitol police to escort her safely to her office.

Her brother Wellington wired her, warning, "Montana is 100 percent against you." However, she told constituents, "I voted my convictions and redeemed my campaign pledges." Rankin's vote made the rest of her term irrelevant in the war fever that followed as reporters and colleagues largely ignored her. She told friends, "I have nothing left but my integrity."

NARRATIVE

The Helena Independent compared her to “a dagger in the hands of the German propagandists, a dupe of the Kaiser, a member of the Hun army in the United States, and a crying schoolgirl.” NAWSA dissociated itself from the pacifist position by announcing, “Miss Rankin was not voting for the suffragists of the nation—she represents Montana.”

For her part, Jeanette Rankin said, “There can be no compromise with war; it cannot be reformed or controlled; cannot be disciplined into decency or codified into common sense; for war is the slaughter of human beings, temporarily regarded as enemies, on as large a scale as possible.”

After completing her second term in Congress in 1943, Rankin chose not to run again for public office, but to direct her energies to the efforts that had the most meaning for her: civil rights, pacifism, and social welfare. In a 1972 interview, Rankin said, “If I am remembered for no other act,” she said, “I want to be remembered as the only woman who ever voted to give women the right to vote.”

She opposed U.S. involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and led a Vietnam War protest at the Capitol when she was 87. In order to continue to oppose the Vietnam War, she was even considering a third run for Congress when she died in 1973.

Walter Cronkite, who was a United Press editor in 1941, gave an interview in 2001 describing the scene in Congress after the president’s speech requesting a declaration of war. Cronkite called Rankin, “The one member of Congress paralyzed by principle in the face of an enemy attack in 1941.” Matt Wasniewski, historian of the House of Representatives, summed up Rankin’s life: “Just a remarkable career. Whether you agreed with her or not, she stuck to her guns.”