First woman in Congress, the 'first woman' of peace

WASHINGTON (AP) — She was the first of her gender elected to Congress, and she enraged her constituents within days of taking her seat in 1917 — just as she did after her comeback a quarter-century later — because she had no use for wars.

So Jeannette Rankin of Montana voted against them. Against both World War I and World War II. No other member of the House or the Senate did that.

It was 68 years ago that Rankin, the daughter of Montana pioneers, strode down the aisle of the House with a bouquet of violets and took her seat, bowing twice to the cheers and ovation of her male colleagues.

She was elected, mind you, in 1916 — four years before the 19th Amendment gave women nationwide the right to vote. But her popularity quickly soured, as it did when she returned to the House in 1941, because of her simple belief that war is stupid.

Now, 12 years after her death at age 93, Jeannette Rankin is being accorded a lasting place of honor in the nation's Capitol. Today, her bronze likeness will be unveiled in the hallowed Statuary Hall, reserved for the states to display their pride in two of their own.

A Republican, Rankin was a leader of the suffrage movement and an early advocate of birth control and child labor laws. But it was her ardent pacifism, bolstered by seven trips to Gandhi's India, that drew the most enmity during her remarkable career.

On Dec. 8, 1941, when Congress swiftly passed the declaration of war against Japan following the famed address of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rankin was the only member of either the House or Senate to vote "No."

"As a woman, I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else," she told the House.

The public reaction was immediate. Her brother, Wellington, told her "Montana is 110 percent against you."

It was not a new experience. In 1917, on the fourth day of her first term, she voted against U.S. entry into World War I. That was a costly vote both financially and politically: she had contracted for a speaking tour, paying a then-lucrative $500 per talk, which had a cancellation clause if she opposed the war, and the voters of Montana rejected her bid for the Senate a year later.

During her first term, she exposed unfair working conditions at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving and revealing the use of the "rustling card," a blacklist system, as the cause of labor problems in Montana's copper mines.

She authored the first bill for government-sponsored instruction in maternity and infant hygiene, supported an eight-hour day for all workers, and was among the first to support government programs to control venereal disease.

As for women's role in politics, she said that "it is altogether fitting and proper that a mother be at the bedside of her child, sick with typhoid fever; it is also altogether fitting ahd proper for the mother to go into the public forum to eradicate the causes of typhoid fever."

> ***'As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else'***
>
> **— Rep. Jeanette Rankin, R-Mont.**
> **House of Representatives, Dec. 8, 1941**

Between her terms in Congress, she worked as a lobbyist for the National Consumers' League and the National Council for the Prevention of War.

In 1958 John F. Kennedy, then a senator, wrote that Rankin was one of the top "Three Women of Courage" in American history. Despite Kennedy's admiration, she supported Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential campaign.

In 1968 she led 5,000 women, members of the Jeannette Rankin Brigade, in a march through a Washington snowstorm to protest the Vietnam War. She was 87.

"War," she said, "is a vicious, stupid way of settling a dispute. It has nothing to do with what the dispute is."

She also said that "we could have peace in one year if women were organized," but women have "been worms. They let their sons go off to war because they're afraid their husbands will lose their jobs . . . if they protest."

On the women's liberation movement: "Women's lib is very encouraging. The way we know it's growing is that the men make fun of it."

She recalled that during the suffrage movement, "We just paid no attention or we made fun right back. They'd whisper, 'If you vote, all the bad women will be able to vote, too,' and we said, 'All the bad men vote, don't they?'"

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