

MS. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"Women must get into the political game and stay in it."
—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Despite the fact that the binary political party system seems determined to stick with two (white) males for the nation's highest office, a woman elected President of the United States in the year 2000 would be a proper beginning to the new millennium.

American women have had the vote for 77 years, an almost equal amount of time women spent fighting to attain it. For most of those years women rather passively voted the way their husbands or boyfriends voted. Women voted for the first time in equal numbers as men in 1980, and in 1982 more women voted than men; though women voted differently than men that year and succeeding years, they did not necessarily vote for women.

A significant change was made in 1992 when women campaigned in unprecedented numbers for every conceivable office in the country, local, state and federal — including at least one woman for President. Women entered politics backed by other women, finally using their majority power to elect women to public office.

Women and supportive men of the two major political parties could successfully put forward prominent and well qualified women as candidates for the Presidency of each party in 2000 if they start working at it now.

It is not an impossible idea. It is a much better idea than the knee-jerk assumptions that only two (white) males — specifically Al Gore and Jack Kemp at this point of discussion, with herd noises being made by a group of Bush-era has-beens — are the only reasonable choices, a form of gender apartheid by a status quo unwilling to see beyond its own shriveled genitals.

There is certainly precedence. Liberals and leftists have periodically fronted women for President, more often as Veep in third parties, and once in the Democratic Party with Geraldine Ferraro in 1980.

Women have contributed hugely to American history, but as it is with blacks and others who have helped build this nation, their contributions have been ignored and under valued.

Even before Europeans settled the Americas, American women were powerful forces in their separate communities and tribal councils. Iroquois women owned the land and controlled the economy by supervising the distribution of food. The Cherokee Women's Council helped select male leaders, declared war and determined the fate of captives. In 1540 Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto was welcomed in present day Georgia by a woman chieftain who gave him a string of pearls.

Perhaps the beginning of the present day women's movement was in 1640 when Ann Hibbens of Boston insisted she had the right to complain about male carpenters she had hired. Church elders attacked her for thinking she could handle such affairs better than her husband, "which is a plain breach of the rule of Christ." She was excommunicated, and was hanged for witchcraft 16 years later.

Women agitated for equality long before the American Revolution. A group of women complained in a letter to the *New York Journal* in 1733: "We are housekeepers, pay our taxes, carry on trade, and most of us are she merchants, and as we in some measure contribute to the support of government, we ought to be entitled to some of the sweets of it."

As the result of a successful case by a Virginia slave in 1655 that she was a free woman because her father was white, southern colonies (including Virginia) declared that all newborn African Americans were slaves regardless of the parents' status. (A century later another woman won her freedom in Massachusetts after arguing that she was illegally enslaved because her mother was white which meant she was born free.)

In 1701 six men and six women were selected for an Albany N.Y. jury, which was an exception. During much of American history women were kept off juries; not until 1975 did the U.S. Supreme Court rule that woman's automatic exemption from jury duty is unconstitutional.

Many other instances of women defying religious and royalist male authority occurred before the Revolution. Hopes were high among many women that the Revolution would be truly revolutionary and allow them equal status. But "Liberty for All" was selective and left out women and slaves of both sexes (and as it turned out, working class people as well).

"In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the



HENRIK DRESCHER

Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." Abigail Adams wrote in a 1776 letter to her husband John, a delegate to the rebel Congress in Philadelphia. "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."

(She scolded her husband for not taking her advice in a letter two months later: "I cannot say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men...you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken.")

During the Revolution women served on battle lines, manned cannon (such as the famous "Molly Pitcher" who took over a cannon when her husband was shot), nursed wounded and cooked for the militias and regular troops. City women raised money for food and clothes for Washington's ragtag army. In the meantime frontier women fought Indians unleashed on western settlements by the British.

In 1777 several Daughters of Liberty stripped a man who criticized the Revolution, covered him with molasses and stuck on dozens of flower petals. Philadelphia women in 1780 called for action in a broadside titled *The Sentiments of American Women*. They described themselves as "Born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic government."

In 1787 the new United States Constitution left the determination of who was eligible to vote to the states, but did not specifically bar women from holding federal office. States rights meant then as now limited participation or none by those outside the white male status quo. New Jersey's state constitution gave the vote to all property owners worth a certain amount, which left wives as well as unmarried women ineligible; however the state's election law was briefly revised in 1790 and referred to voters as "he or she." New York specifically denied voting rights to women in its constitution in 1777, and other states quickly followed suit.

Thomas Jefferson, principle author of the Declaration of Independence which the month of July is annually obliged to celebrate, said as President in response to a suggestion in 1807 by Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, "The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I."

"Is the needle sufficient?" Judith Sargent Murray wrote in her essay "On the Equality of the Sexes" which appeared in *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1790. Writing under the name "Constantia", she argued that women's and men's mental abilities were equal and proposed full education for women. "Will it be said that the judgment of a male of two years is, is more sage than that of a female's of the same age? I believe the reverse is generally observed to be true. But from that period, what partiality! how is the one exalted and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! ...Grant that their minds are by nature equal, yet who shall wonder at the apparent superiority."

The 19th century began with women voting in substantial numbers in the 1800 Presidential election, but in 1807 New Jersey changed its election law once more by inserting the words "white" and "male" into its voting requirements, and women were not permitted to hold office in any of the states.

In a manner similar to the civil rights movement of the 1960s producing white anti-Vietnam War activists, the women's rights movement of the 19th century converged from the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement. Men initially controlled abolitionist groups but frustrated women broke off and formed their own abolitionist societies which generally included black as well as white women.

In 1825 Scottish-born Frances (Fanny) Wright attempted to abolish slavery with a plan for allowing slaves to work on public land and buy their freedom with the profits. Her attempt at setting up a model plantation failed but four years later she set a "Hall of Science" in a New York City church and lectured on women's rights. "Until women assume the place in society which good sense and good feeling alike assign to them," she declared, "human improvement must advance but feebly. It is in vain that we would circumscribe the power of one-half of our race and that by far the most important and influential."

(Fanny Wright wrote in 1829, "There is a vulgar persuasion that the ignorance of women, by favoring their subordination, insures their utility. (It's) the same argument employed by the ruling few against the subject many; by the rich against the poor in democracies; by the learned professions against the people in all countries.")

The newly formed American Anti-Slavery Society refused to admit woman members in 1833, but 20 white and black women formed the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society. In their constitution they underlined that slavery and prejudice violated the laws of God and the Declaration of Independence. Charter members included Lucretia Coffin Mott, Esther Moore, Rebecca Buffum, Grace Bustill Douglass, and Charlotte Forten and her three daughters, Margaretta, Sarah Louise and Harriet.

The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was threatened by a mob when it scheduled abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison as speaker in 1835. When the mayor ordered the women to leave, Maria Weston Chapman replied, "If this is the last bulwark of freedom, we may as well die here as anywhere." The women, white and black, joined hands and walked through the mob to Chapman's home.

The first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was held in New York in May 1837. Of the 200 women who attended, at least 20 were black, and Grace Douglass (wife of escaped slave Frederick Douglass) was elected vice president. The women declared that it was time to move out of their "circumscribed limits" and to use their "pens, purses and influence to end slavery."

The second convention of the women's antislavery group held in Philadelphia the following year was met by an angry rock throwing mob, which burned down the hall they met in. Lucretia Mott, a convention leader that year, was threatened. But the next day the women declared "the prejudice against color the very spirit of slavery" and urged all abolitionists to "sit with African Americans in their places of worship, walk with them on the street, and invite them into their homes."

The American Anti-Slavery Society finally gave women voting rights in 1839, and the next year Abigail Foster was



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