

MS. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON

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Women urge Congress they be granted the right to vote on the basis of the 14th & 15th Amendments

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 2004 could definitively alter the course of empire and radically avert the bullying schoolyard machismo that has characterized American politics since the beginning of this new century/millennium, which Richard Goldstein depicts as "terror of a world without white male power."

It is shameful that women are summarily cut out of any viable prospect for attaining the Presidency. Prominent and well-qualified women of the two major political parties are seldom given a decent opportunity at the White House (except as 'First Lady') which was certainly demonstrated in the first Presidential election of the 21st century. Quite the contrary, the nation has been saddled with the swagger of blustering maleness despite a popular majority of women voters whose choice was denied by fraud and corruption at the very top of male-dominated power.

American women have had the vote for 84 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; although 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.

It is not impossible to imagine a woman as President. It is a much better idea than the knee-jerk assumptions that only two (white) males — George W. Bush Jr. the uncontested Republican incumbent and John Kerry for the Democrats (third parties are especially anathema this year) — are the only reasonable choices for the Presidency, 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 VP in third parties (such as the American Green Party in 2000 with Winona Leduc sidekicking Ralph Nader), 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.

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 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 spawning 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.

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."

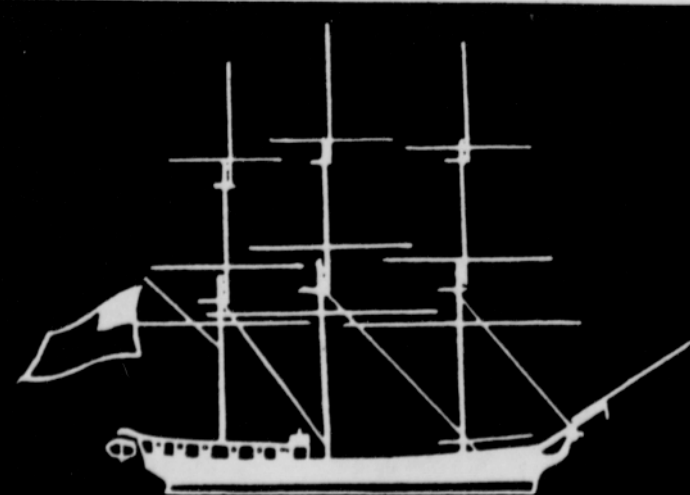
As the result of a successful case by a Virginia slave in 1655 that she was a free woman because her father was white, southern colonies (including Virginia) declared that all newborn African-Americans were slaves regardless of the parents' status. (A century later a woman won her freedom in Massachusetts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



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