

JEANNETTE RANKIN

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Jeannette Rankin (1880–1973) was born and raised in Montana. While studying social work at the University of Washington, she joined the women’s suffrage movement. Soon after, she became a field secretary for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). She traveled across the United States, advocating for suffrage. In 1916, she was elected as the first woman in the U.S. House of Representatives. Just three days after being sworn in, she cast one of two votes that would define public memory of her service—a vote against the American declaration of war on Germany in World War I. Rankin introduced a voting rights amendment that passed the House in 1918, and was the only woman in Congress to cast a vote for woman suffrage. She unsuccessfully ran for U.S. Senate in 1918, and spent the next two decades advocating for peace and social welfare. In 1940, she was again elected to the House, and in 1941, cast the only vote against the declaration of war on Japan. She left Congress in 1942, and remained active in anti-war movements and the philosophy of nonviolent protest for the rest of her life. She died in California in 1973.

KEY EVENTS

Election of 1916, Nineteenth Amendment, Election of 1940, Declaration of War on the Empire of Japan (December 8, 1941)

KEY PEOPLE

Woodrow Wilson, Fiorello LaGuardia, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alice Paul

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On the afternoon of January 10, 1918, Representative Jeannette Rankin opened debate in the House of Representatives on a Constitutional amendment granting women suffrage. The historic weight of the moment was not lost; the first woman elected to a national legislature in any democracy, opening the first House floor debate on women’s suffrage. The House greeted her with applause as Representative John Edward Baker yielded his time to “permit the lady from Montana to open the debate under the circumstances.” Her speech—given as American participation in World War I dominated the political landscape—tied together the war effort and the women’s suffrage movement.

FUN FACT

Jeanette Rankin is the only person to have voted against both world wars in Congress. At age 89, she led a Vietnam War protest march in Washington, D.C. Learn more at: <https://blogs.weta.org/boundarystones/2016/08/24/jeannette-rankin-brigade>.



C.T. Chapman, Miss Jeannette Rankin, of Montana, speaking from the balcony of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, April 2, 1917, Library of Congress (mnwp.156007), <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mnwp.156007/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make and distribute one copy of Rankin’s speech and questions to each student.
- Ask students to read Rankin’s speech and answer the questions.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Direct students to pair up to discuss their answers, with particular emphasis on the final question regarding the expansion of rights in the wake of American wars.
- Bring the class back together and ask each pair of students what rights they think may be expanded in the wake of the Global War on Terror. List these on the board, and lead a discussion of which options the class believes are most likely (or unlikely) and why.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the recently-renovated Rankin Park in Missoula, Montana. The park features a memorial to the congresswoman and a “peace path.” Learn more at: <http://www.ci.missoula.mt.us/2060/Rankin-Park>.

Jeannette Rankin owned a property called Shady Grove near Athens, Georgia, from which she helped found the Georgia Peace Society. A Georgia State Historical Marker is placed at the property, two miles northwest of Watkinsville. Learn more here: http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/historical_markers/county/oconee/jeannette-rankins-georgia-home.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Congressional Record, U.S. House of Representatives, January 10, 1918
U.S. Government Printing Office
<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1918-pt1-v56/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1918-pt1-v56.pdf>

Jeanette Rankin Papers
Montana Historical Society

Jeanette Rankin Papers
Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University

SECONDARY SOURCES

The 19th Amendment
Social Welfare History Project,
Virginia Commonwealth University
<https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/woman-suffrage/the-19th-amendment/>

Jeanette Rankin
Biographical Directory of the United States Congress
<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=r000055>

Jeannette Rankin
National Association of Social Workers Foundation
<http://www.naswfoundation.org/pioneers/r/rankin.html>

“Jeannette Rankin: The Woman who Voted to Give Women the Right to Vote,” January 26, 2017
Pieces of History Blog, National Archives and Records Administration
<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2017/01/26/jeannette-rankin-the-woman-who-voted-to-give-women-the-right-to-vote/>



Jeanette Rankin, c. 1917, Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-66385), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688488/>

REMARKS BY REPRESENTATIVE JEANNETTE RANKIN, JANUARY 10, 1918 (EXCERPT)

“...To-day there are men and women in every field of endeavor who are bending all their energies toward a realization of this dream of universal justice. They believe that we are waging a war for democracy. The farmer who knows the elements of a democracy becomes something of an idealist when he contemplates the possibility of feeding the world during this crisis. The woman who knits all day to keep from thinking of the sacrifice she is making wonders what this democracy is which is denied and for which she is asked to give. The miner is dreaming his dreams of industrial democracy as he goes 2,000 feet underground, bringing forth the rock precious metals to help in the prosecution of this war.

“The girl who works in the Treasury no longer works until she is married. She knows now that she will work on and on and on. The war has taken from her opportunities for the joys that young girls look forward to. Cheerfully and willingly she makes her sacrifice. And she will pay to the very end in order that the future need not find women paying again for the same cause.

“The boys at the front know something of the democracy for which they are fighting. These courageous lads who are paying with their lives testified to the sincerity of their fight when they sent home their ballots in the New York elections and voted two to one in favor of woman suffrage and democracy at home. [Applause.]

“These are the people of the Nation. These are the fiber and sinew of war—the mother, the farmer, the miner, the industrial worker, the soldier. These are the people who are resting their faith in the Congress of the United States because they believe that Congress knows what democracy means. These people will not fight in vain.

“Can we afford to allow these men and women to doubt for a single instant the sincerity of our protestations of democracy? How shall we answer their challenge, gentlemen; how shall we explain to them the meaning of democracy if the same Congress that voted for war to make the world safe for democracy refuses to give this small measure of democracy to the women of our country? [Prolonged applause.]”

Remarks by Representative Jeannette Rankin, January 10, 1918 (excerpt), Congressional Record, U.S. House of Representatives, pp. 771–772, U.S. Government Printing Office

- How does Rankin tie the war effort together with the push for women's suffrage?
- Rankin uses the images of a farmer, a woman knitting, a miner, a Treasury worker, and a soldier to represent her views of the "average American" of 1918. Why do you think she chose these occupations?
- In the wake of World War I—and by Rankin's argument, because of World War I—the right to vote was extended to women. Similarly, the right to vote was extended to African American men after the Civil War, and to 18–20 year olds after the Vietnam War. Since 2001, the United States has been engaged in the Global War on Terrorism. How do you think certain rights might be expanded after this period of conflict in American history?