

Subject File
Women's Suffrage and Feminism
1913-32

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44

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Mrs. Herbert C. Hoover,
 Washington, D. C.

Dear Madam:

Perhaps you and your readers wish to know more about the recent riots in front of the White House. The case of the United States vs. Mabel Vernon and others was called in the Police Court of the District of Columbia, on June 27. Six American women for the first time in the history of our country defended their right to promote by peaceful methods suffrage for American women. Technically these women were charged with "obstructing the traffic." Their offence was carrying purple, white and gold flags, banners with quotations from the President's speeches about democracy, and our own appeals to him. These banners read "We shall fight for the things we have always carried nearest our hearts, for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government," "We demand democracy in our own land," "Mr. President, how long must American Women wait for liberty?" (It should be noted that no arrests were ever made for carrying before the White House the banner stating to the Russian envoys that America is not a democracy.)

For five months the suffrage pickets of the National Woman's Party held these banners before the White House without interference from the police or any kind of disorder. There was no law or act of Congress against holding them there. On June 25 they were arrested for doing what for one hundred and fifty days had been treated by the authorities as legal. On June 27 they were

July 10, 1917.

brought to trial and defended their right to continue to tell the truth about American democracy. Miss Mabel Vernon described the long course of the picket, the demonstrations of winter and spring, the parades that brought hundreds of women from other states, ending on March 3 with a parade of over one thousand women around the White House.

"I say," she declared, "that if you think we were performing illegally for one hundred and fifty days, you should have interfered before the one hundred and fifty-first day arrived.

"The fight in which we are now engaged," she continued, "is 'the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government'. The method is one which has come within the displeasure of the law here this morning. But it has to be fought. And if it has to be fought in ways which the District will not permit, still it must go on. It is our duty to impress upon this government; upon the President of the United States, the fact that women are unenfranchised -- the insistent question which must be immediately settled by this government."

"I find these defendants guilty as charged," was the verdict of the Judge, "of obstructing the highway in violation of the police regulations and the act of Congress, and impose a fine of twenty-five dollars in each case, or in default of that, three days' imprisonment."

The six young women refused to pay the fine, or to make any promises as to future "good conduct." They were each sentenced to three days in the District jail.

Two demonstrations in the name of liberty were held in Washington at noon on "Independence Day," July 4, 1917. One demonstration was held on one side of the White House, on the Monument grounds, and the other on the other side of the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Speaker Champ Clark, on the Monument side, stated to a great Fourth of July crowd the propositions upon which our government rests:

"Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed," intoned the speaker. "You have the right to any sort of government you please * * * * It is our highest duty so to live and act that we shall preserve and perfect free government and hand it down to our children."

And the great crowd about the Washington Monument roared and cheered.

On the other side of the White House a little group of women made a protest in the name of the same democracy that the Speaker's fine period revolved around. Eleven suffragists, carrying the col-

ors which, to them, typify the complete freedom of the future, carrying in advance a lettered banner, marched toward the White House gates.

The lettered banner in advance, which caught the sun like a promise, carried the identical words that the Speaker was dramatizing not many rods away: "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." This banner was torn down and the crowd cheered.

And the police force of the District of Columbia, ably assisted by a few male patriots in the crowd, fell upon that little procession of white-faced girls protesting with colored banners, and tore the banners and broke the staffs and arrested the standard-bearers, whose little protest symbolized the ineffectual demand voteless women have been making for the fifty years.

The crowd that amiably listened to the Speaker dispersed and forgot his periods. But the torn and trampled banner of the women boasting an unrealized democracy, was produced in a United States court when the women demanding liberty were "tried". They were tried by a judge appointed by the President, and a prosecuting attorney appointed by the President. The courts in the District of Columbia are in no way responsible to the people.

Among the eleven women sentenced on July 6 for the Fourth of July demonstration are:

Miss Margaret Whittemore, of Detroit, daughter of Henry Ford's lawyer, Miss Gladys Greiner of Baltimore, daughter of a member of the railway Commission to Russia; Miss Lucy Burns, of New York, widely known as a suffrage leader and writer; Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, of Philadelphia, well known as a social and philanthropic leader; Miss Iris Calderhead of Kansas, daughter of the former Congressman; Mrs. Helena Hill Weed of Connecticut, daughter of Congressman Hill; Vida Milholland, sister of the late Inez Milholland Boissevain, both of whom visited Winnemucca, Carson, Virginia and Reno in the campaign last October.

The evidence in both the cases of June 27 and July 6 showed that there was no obstruction in the traffic caused by the girls, as charged, but that the crowds gathered after the arrests had been made; that the obstruction was caused by the action of the police and the crowd. But in this war for democracy abroad we must not tell the truth about democracy at home. There was no law against what the girls did; but the judge appointed by the President, and the prosecuting attorney also appointed by him, carried out their instructions and the women were sentenced to jail after refusing to pay their fines. Eleven cells had been prepared in the jail before the court convened on July 6.

I was talking to Senator Walsh of Montana this morning in the Police Court. He is a leader of the Democratic administration. He

had come to the court to look after the interests of a Montana suffragist who had been arrested on July 4. I urged him to end the agitation by securing action on the Susan B. Anthony amendment this session. He said that in this session of Congress only war legislation could be considered (as requested by the President.) I said that we considered that the national suffrage amendment, by which the strength and energy of the women of the nation could be protected and conserved for the good of the nation, was as important war legislation as the conservation of food. He assented, but said that we must wait. I replied, "Twenty millions of American women are unenfranchised, millions of them are demanding liberty. Would you tell millions of men to wait?" He agreed that he would not.

We must defend our right to tell the truth about American democracy in our work for liberty. When you read about Nevada women, or any other women arrested for obstructing the traffic in front of the White House, know that they were acting legally, that they were arrested for carrying banners with quotations from President Wilson's speeches about democracy, or with extracts from the Declaration of Independence, or other documents about human liberty. When called upon I must lead a similar group to assert our American right of free thought and free speech. Know too that the offense for which we go to jail is not "obstruction," but working to establish democracy in the United States of America. The women of Russia have won equal suffrage in war time, the women of England have been promised equal suffrage by act of parliament, a measure urged by the Prime Minister himself to strengthen the country in time of war.

The women of the National Women's Party are performing an act of the highest patriotism in doing their utmost to win freedom for American women at this of all times, in this war for democracy. The liberty of American women must be established, because liberty is just, and just nations are efficient nations; it must be established that we may make good abroad our professions of democracy at home, that we may unify and solidify the nation behind the government. We need our highest-man power, our highest woman-power to win this war.

No Nevada senator or congressman, no other senator or congressman has lifted a finger to help the Susan B. Anthony amendment, although we have nearly enough votes in both houses pledged to secure its passage. The President and the President alone can secure its passage; when he lifts his finger Congress will act. As long as President Wilson prefers to send women to jail on petty and technical charges to giving American women justice, we will go to jail. Persecution has always advanced liberty.

The right of American women to tell the truth about our government, about democracy, and to work for democracy, must be defended. Our work will go on.



Very sincerely yours,

President, Nevada Woman's Civic League
Vice Chairman, National Woman's Party.