

Woodrow Wilson Came Late to Alice Paul's Parade

By JAMIE STIEHM

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Who was the breathtaking modern young woman, 28, who outwitted President Woodrow Wilson at the first turn in 1913 and won their battle of wills at the end of seven years?

Alice Paul was her name and the president never really had a chance against her. With fresh, defiant street tactics she learned abroad in London, Paul deftly led the "Votes for Women!" suffrage movement to victory years after the aging Susan B. Anthony died. So please don't say women were "granted" or given the vote, as men do. It was taken and won by women—Quaker women, who were born, raised, and educated as equals in their families within the Protestant Society of Friends. Paul and Anthony were Quakers. Paul is an alumna of Swarthmore College, class of 1905.

Once again, Paul's timing is brilliant, even in death. She surfaces in memory again as new questions are being raised—or old ones raked over—about women's rightful place. Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg just published a new "Lean In" manifesto, advocating a more assertive stance for her generation of women in their 40s. Yet her peer Marissa Mayer, the new head of Yahoo, acts as if the feminist movement is a thing of the past. Betty Friedan's cultural classic, *The Feminine Mystique*, has hit the 50-year mark, ripe for a revisit.

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From the first day Wilson arrived in Washington as president-elect, he found Paul a force to be reckoned with. Wilson was born in pre-Civil War Virginia in 1856—it's well to remember that, for he was no friend to the advancement of civil or human rights at home. To be fair, the first great 20th century president, Theodore Roosevelt, opposed the women's rights movement, too.

At grand Union Station, there was no crowd to greet Wilson before his inauguration on March 4, 1913, a century ago today. When he haughtily demanded where the public was, the answer came: Everyone's at the suffragette parade, sir. The avant-garde Paul was leading that parade. Don't you wish you were there? Well, yesterday a centennial suffrage parade took place to commemorate the event. The scene of thousands of high spirits jammed the land near the Capitol, the citadel of democracy women had to claim as citizens.

This was no matter of chance, but a shot across Wilson's bow. Alice Paul's strategy as the new leader of the women suffrage movement was to announce she would take the fight to the White House gates. On daily schedules, women kept vigils there and chained themselves to the gates, holding signs out in the open demanding liberty. Attracting attention, women were being unladylike, many of them from polite Philadelphia families. As the years went on, they were getting arrested and force-fed—abused—in squalid jails. Paul herself went on a hunger strike in jail. Legions of women, an army of volunteers, literally suffered for suffrage.

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Suddenly, a sea change happened. Too many wives, mothers, sisters were joining the mass movement for suffrage to seem like an abstraction. Society's sympathies started to turn toward the suffragettes. Paul's nonviolent confrontational strategy and public pressure began to wear down the president's steady refusal to back down. The professorial Wilson, father of three daughters and uxorious husband to his second wife, did not approve of women who challenged authority—his authority. But the times changed on him.

A. Scott Berg, author of a new Wilson biography, [declared in *The New York Times*](#) yesterday that Wilson decided at the close of World War I that women should be rewarded for keeping the homes fires burning with the vote. Wilson even convinced Congress of this, he contends, glossing over Wilson's reluctance and giving him much more credit than he is due.

Alice Paul made woman suffrage come to pass. Woodrow Wilson was just the man in the way.

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