
Women's Suffrage and Night of Terror

At first President Wilson was not very responsive to the women's protest. At points he even seemed amused with it by tipping his hat and smiling. It was said that at one point Wilson even invited them in for coffee.

At other points in time, he ignored the protests altogether, such as when the Sentinels protested on the day of his second inauguration ceremony. As the Sentinels continued to protest, the issue became bigger and Wilson's opinion began to change. Although he continued to dislike the Silent Sentinels, he began to recognize them as a group seriously presenting him with an issue.

After President Wilson's reelection, Alice Paul called for members of the National Woman's Party to picket the White House to convince the president to put pressure on Democratic senators to vote in favor of a constitutional suffrage amendment.

Lucy Burns led most of the picket demonstrations. Picketers were not molested and, in fact, the president often waved to them as he left the White House. To maintain interest in the press, Paul and Burns organized groups representing women from different walks of life to picket on different days.

Founded by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns in 1913, the National Woman's Party (NWP) fought for women's suffrage. It was originally called the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage (CU), until 1916 when it developed a new name, the NWP. The party broke off from a larger one, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), which was mainly in Washington. The NWP broke off from NAWSA because they wanted the woman suffrage work to be focused on the federal level, rather than only the state and local levels.

They opposed President Wilson, all Democrats, as well as World War I, oftentimes finding themselves at odds with other suffragists. The NWP was an aggressive party, with goals of direct action and confrontation to send their message, rather than more the passive tactics that had been practiced in the past. The NWP conducted marches, acts of civil disobedience, and they became the first group to picket the White House.

On June 22, 1917, police arrested protesters Lucy Burns and Katherine Morey on charges of obstructing traffic because they carried a banner quoting from Wilson's speech to Congress. The charges were dropped. The police warned the women that they would be arrested if they continued. Nevertheless, they persisted. The first arrests were in June – three-day sentences,

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mostly for “obstructing the sidewalk.”

The judges fined the picketers \$25, which they refused to pay. After serving the three days, the women returned to their sites in front of the White House. But the women arrested in August were sentenced to 60 days – at Occoquan. Servicemen often agitated demonstrators and, in some cases, attacked pickets while policemen did nothing to prevent the confrontation.

By November, several picketers had been arrested multiple times, and Whittaker had lost patience. The suffragists demanded to be considered political prisoners, a distinction that could possibly mean better treatment at the D.C. Jail instead of Occoquan. When the women arrived at the Occoquan Workhouse (now the Lorton Correctional Complex) they were asked to give up everything except for their clothing.

They were then taken to a showering station where they were ordered to strip naked and bathe. There was only one bar of soap available for everyone in the workhouse to use, so all of the suffragists refused to use it. Afterwards they were given baggy, unclean, and uncomfortable prison clothes and taken to dinner. They could barely eat dinner because it was so sour and distasteful.

Right Before

The conditions of the Occoquan Workhouse were very unsanitary and unsafe. Prisoners had to share cells and many other things with those who had syphilis, and worms were frequently found in their food. After serving three days in the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia, Wilson pardoned the women. At first they refused to be pardoned because they were innocent and had nothing to be pardoned for, but they were eventually forced out. After a heated debate, the House of Representatives created a committee to deal with women's suffrage in September 1917. Massachusetts Representative Joseph Walsh opposed the creation of the committee, thinking the House was yielding to "the nagging of iron-jawed angels."

He referred to the Silent Sentinels as "bewildered, deluded creatures with short skirts and short hair." As the suffragists kept protesting, the jail terms grew longer. Finally, police arrested Alice Paul on October 20, 1917, while she carried a banner that quoted Wilson: "The time has come to conquer or submit, for us there can be but one choice. We have made it." She was sentenced to seven months in prison. Paul and many others were again sent to the Occoquan Workhouse, where Paul was placed in solitary confinement for two weeks, with nothing to eat except bread and water. She became weak and unable to walk, so she was taken to the prison hospital. There, she began a hunger strike, and others joined her.

In response to the hunger strike the prison doctors force fed the women by putting tubes down

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their throats. They force fed them substances that would have as much protein as possible, like raw eggs mixed with milk. Many of the women ended up vomiting because their stomachs could not handle the protein. One physician reported that Alice Paul had "a spirit like Joan of Arc, and it is useless to try to change it. She will die but she will never give up." [12].

Nolan and most others arrested on November 10, 1917, were sent to Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. On arrival at the workhouse, women refused to put on prison uniforms or work; the guards became violent, kicking and beating the prisoners in what became known in the suffrage movement as "The Night of Terror." Women again resorted to a hunger strike. Upon their release, many were too weak to walk on their own.

Heart of The Story, During Event: As Woodrow Wilson took office in January, demonstrators took up positions outside the White House, holding round-the-clock vigils demanding the vote for women. In spite of the on-going world war, they refused to step aside or muffle their demands. Instead, Alice Paul, Lucy Burns and other members of the National Woman's Party aimed to humiliate the president and expose the hypocrisy of "making the world safe for democracy" when there was none at home. Their banners said, "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty." They hung Wilson in effigy and burned copies of his speeches.

Arrests began in June. "Obstructing traffic" was the usual charge, but many prison officials—as well as citizens—considered the suffragists traitors. In the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia, they ate rancid food; were denied medical care and refused visitors. The demonstrators applied for political prisoner status. It was denied. But the government's tactic didn't work. On release from prison, women returned to the White House gates.

Their ranks swelled. By November, there were more marches and more arrests. An investigation had been launched into conditions at Occoquan and the activities of its superintendent, W.H. Whittaker, whose special cruelty was well known.

Whittaker and his workhouse guards greeted 33 returning protesters on what has become known as the infamous "Night of Terror," November 14, 1917. Forty-four club-wielding men beat, kicked, dragged and choked their charges, which included at least one 73-year-old woman. Women were lifted into the air and flung to the ground. One was stabbed between the eyes with the broken staff of her banner. Lucy Burns was handcuffed to the bars of her cell in a torturous position. Women were dragged by guards twisting their arms and hurled into concrete "punishment cells." At Occoquan, rats ran in and out of the unlit cells.

The prisoners held contests to count the number of maggots in their food. And the prison denied the women a most basic human dignity – their privacy. "In the morning we were taken one by one to a washroom at the end of the hall," Day recalled in her memoir, "The Long Loneliness."

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“There was a toilet in each cell, open, and paper and flushing were supplied by the guard. It was as though one were in a zoo with the open bars leading into the corridor.”

Four hours later, Occoquan Superintendent W.H. Whittaker set his guards upon the women. Dora Lewis, thrown into a cell, hit her head on an iron bed. Cellmate Alice Cosu thought Lewis was dead (she survived) and suffered a heart attack.

Lucy Burns was stripped naked, her hands raised over her head and chained to the bars until the next day. Some of the women protested the physical abuse of that one night by going on a hunger strike. For their troubles they were force fed raw eggs and milk, which made them violently ill. Those who did not fast were given food so horrific, part of the psychological cat-and-mouse game, that they sent worms found in their soup and bread to the warden.

Right After: Newspapers carried stories about how the protesters were being treated. The stories angered some Americans and subsequently created more support for the suffrage amendment. On November 27 and 28, all the protesters were released, including Alice Paul after spending five weeks in prison. Later, in March 1918, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals vacated six suffragists' convictions. The court held that the informations on which the women's convictions were based were overly vague.

For all the pain, this brutal night may have turned the tide. Less than two weeks later, a court-ordered hearing exposed the beaten women to the world and the judge agreed they had been terrorized for nothing more than exercising their constitutional right to protest. It would take three more years to win the vote, but the courageous women of 1917 had won a new definition of female patriotism.

After about two weeks, a court-ordered hearing for charges against the women suffragists took place. The decision of the hearing declared that every one of the 218 suffragists had been illegally arrested, illegally convicted and illegally imprisoned. The Night of Terror was not addressed in the hearing. The women who were illegally imprisoned and tortured for picketing were aiming to promote women's rights, and they were backed by the National Woman's Party.

However, when the Nineteenth Amendment for women's rights was passed in 1920, very little credit was given to the NWP. Aside from the fact that the women were illegally arrested for practicing their constitutional right to protest, their human rights were violated continuously throughout their imprisonments. There was continued mistreatment in the form of harsh living conditions, food infested with worms, being denied visitors, "punishment cells" and denied medical care when many of the women were ill and some very old. The women's suffrage movement was the push to make the 19th amendment, giving women to right to vote.

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All of the women were kept at the Occoquan workhouse which is located in nearby Lorton in southern Fairfax County, Virginia. On January 9, 1918, Wilson announced his support of the women's suffrage amendment. The next day, the House of Representatives narrowly passed the amendment but the Senate refused to even debate it until October. When the Senate voted on the amendment in October, it failed by two votes.

And in spite of the ruling by the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, arrests of White House protesters resumed on August 6, 1918. To keep up the pressure, on December 16, 1918, protesters started burning Wilson's words in watch fires in front of the White House. On February 9, 1919, the protesters burned Wilson's image in effigy at the White House.

On another front, the National Woman's Party, led by Paul, urged citizens to vote against anti-suffrage senators up for election in the fall of 1918. After the 1918 election, most members of Congress were pro-suffrage. On May 21, 1919, the House of Representatives passed the amendment, and two weeks later on June 4, the Senate finally followed. With their work done in Congress, the protesters turned their attention to getting the states to ratify the amendment.

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