LESSON 3

WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE AND WORLD WAR I

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES CORE CURRICULUM, GRADE 11:
UNITED STATES AND NEW YORK STATE HISTORY

UNIT FOUR  The Progressive Movement: Responses to the Challenges Brought about by Industrialization and Urbanization

UNIT FIVE  At Home and Abroad: Prosperity and Depression 1917–1940

These questions and documents can be used in conjunction with the New York State Education Department standard curriculum for grade 11 Social Studies: United States History and Government, in particular, Unit Four, Chapter 1: Reform in America, Chapter 2: The Rise of American Power, and Unit Five, Chapter 1: War and Prosperity: 1917–1929. Unit 7: The World in Uncertain Times 1950–Present, Chapter 3: Decade of Change: 1960’s, would also be helpful in comparing the feminist movement of the 1960’s with the suffragist movement. Students will be able to discuss women’s changing roles before and after World War I and how that affected the suffrage movement and the 19th amendment.

“How did women use President Wilson’s ideals and rhetoric in their bid for suffrage?”

Document pages 30-37

This lesson is appropriate for units on: women’s suffrage, voting rights and World War I.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO

• describe strategies used by the National Woman’s Party (NWP) to gain women’s suffrage
• identify Wilson’s stated reasons for the U.S.A. entering World War I
• analyze primary written and visual image sources, identifying main ideas and providing supporting evidence and comparing points of view

ACTIVITIES

I. Students read President Woodrow Wilson’s Address to Congress and answer the questions for it.

II. Discuss student answers for the opening reading.

III. Introduce the documents by explaining that advocates for social and political change have often echoed the words and ideas of government documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence (as was the case with the French Revolution and the Filipino struggle for independence), and speeches of presidents to either prove that they were pursuing common goals or to expose the hypocrisy of current laws or government policies.
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IV. Group or Partner Activity: Provide students with either the letter to the editor “Excuses for White House Picketing” or the cartoon from The Suffragist. Have students answer the questions that accompany their primary source.

V. Class discussion of the sources. What were the main ideas of each? How did each source use ideas from Wilson’s speech? How does each source portray the government? How do you think the government would respond to each source and why?

VI. Extension activities to use as homework or as additional class activities:
A. Write a conversation between the two characters in the political cartoon.
B. Have students role play an event described within the letter to the editor or the cartoon.
C. Draw a cartoon or write a letter to the editor in response to Mrs. Belmont’s letter that opposes women’s suffrage or more specifically the actions of the NWP members.
D. Write a paragraph that summarizes how women used Wilson’s words and ideas in their

DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY’S NEW YORK TIMES

Historical events described in textbooks often began with reports in a newspaper. These questions help you compare the past with the present.

1. Find an article about a protest — marching, picketing, etc. — in The New York Times. Who is protesting and what do they want? Compare and contrast the causes and methods of these modern-day protestors with those present in the letter from Mrs. Belmont in 1917.

2. Collect articles from The New York Times about women around the world who seek the right to vote. Using examples from your clippings, write a letter to the editor of The New York Times about this international voting rights issue. Compare this modern-day struggle in other countries with women’s suffrage facts from American history.

3. World War I was fought, according to President Wilson, to “make the world safe for democracy.” Find articles in The New York Times that report situations where there is a fight for democracy. Compare these wars with World War I — what are the obvious and subtle issues? Write an essay in the style of those on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times. Submit your Op-Ed piece to your student newspaper.
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Letter from President Wilson’s secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, to First Lady Edith Wilson.
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PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON’S ADDRESS, APRIL 2, 1917

Corrections are in President Wilson’s handwriting.

We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a government, following such methods, we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic governments of the world. We are now about to accept gauge of battle with this natural foe to liberty and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power. We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

Just because we fight without rancour and without selfish object, seeking nothing for ourselves except what we shall wish to share with all free peoples, we shall, I feel confident, conduct our operations as belligerents without passion and ourselves observe with proud punctilio the principles of right and of fair play we profess to be fighting for.
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GLOSSARY

belligerent  aggressive; hostile; combative (adjective).
captious  critical; finding fault (adjective).
dominion  authority; power (noun).
enfranchisement  setting free; giving the right of suffrage (noun).
gauge  to measure; determine (verb).
grievous  painful; serious; oppressive (adjective).
indemnity  insurance; protection (noun).
militant  confrontational; aggressive (adjective).
nullify  to abolish; cancel out (verb).
pretension  self-importance (noun).
rancor  resentment; bitterness (noun).
suffrage  the right of voting (noun).
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...efforts to gain the vote.

BACKGROUND TO WILSON’S SPEECH

In April 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. In his message to Congress, President Woodrow Wilson used German submarine attacks to justify an American declaration of war, but he also used the language of democracy as a reason to fight. Wilson’s use of “democracy” as a propaganda device was not lost on supporters of women’s suffrage, who used his words to bolster their own cause.

QUESTIONS FOR WILSON’S SPEECH

1. What are the reasons that Wilson gives for the declaration of war?

2. What does he mean by the phrase “The world must be safe for democracy”?

3. To whom in American society in the early 1900’s might this speech seem hypocritical and why?

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, JULY 9, 1917

EXCUSES FOR WHITE HOUSE PICKETING.

A Statement in Extenuation from Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont, of the National Woman’s Party.

Newport, July 7, 1917.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

American women have been imprisoned for holding at the gates of the White House banners demanding democracy at the hands of a Democratic Administration. They have committed no violence, but have stood there quietly, peacefully, lawfully, and gloriously. In return they have been attacked by the metropolitan police and their property destroyed. One of the banners they were arrested for holding bore a quotation from President Wilson’s book, "The New Freedom," which reads: "We are interested in the United States, politically speaking, in nothing but human liberty."

Another banner bore this legend, "How long must women wait for liberty?"

And still another one carried the noble words of Susan B. Anthony, written at a time when our nation was also at war, which read:

"We press our demand for the ballot at this time in no narrow and captious or selfish spirit, but from purest patriotism for the highest good of every citizen, for the safety of the Republic, and as a glorious example to the nation of the earth."

The other three women who were arrested and sentenced to prison carried the tricolored flags of purple, white and gold, the emblem of the National Woman’s Party.

Defenders of democracy abroad become outraged that American women should continue to demand democracy at home. In Italy and France, and even in Germany, the demand by women for participation in the Government is growing more powerful. In new free Russia women have already voted; in England the bill is assured of passage, and yet America, which has laid claim to leadership in world democracy, allows women to be unlawfully arrested through its Government at Washington for merely doing their patriotic duty—urging the wisdom and justice of the great ideal of democracy.

Women cannot be so unpatriotic as not to complain of a grievous injustice which denies them freedom at home while they are asked to send their sons abroad to fight for world democracy. If democracy is noble, if it is a principle, an ideal worth dying for, then is it not an extraordinary attitude on the part of the President and Congress which allows women no right even to appeal for justice, let alone receive it?

If we were now sitting in the halls of Congress or were represented throughout the land, we would not have to take the humiliating method of printing our appeals on innocent banners. We should then be able to speak authoritatively through legislative channels. As it is we are forced to call to the attention of the world the resistance of our Government by the only method left to us. And shall we not protest when men not only continue to refuse to give us our liberty but decide the manner in which we shall demand our liberty?

Foreign Governments are allowed to present their claim to allegiance in the world war for democracy through representative commissions. These demands are officially recognized by our Government. Since the demands of women are not, we must take the only means left to us. "Militant?" Why all this tenderness and delicacy about "militancy" in the form of banner-bearing when the Governments of all nations are conscripting their men, including our own nation, to be militant? They leave them no choice. Why this horror of mild "militancy" on the part of subject citizens?

We insist that we women would be ashamed to stop trying to win democracy at home—now of all times—when the whole world is dying to possess this precious political freedom. We believe with Garibaldi that "only free men can fight for freedom." All we ask is simple justice. And we ask it now, because we know that the enfranchisement of women as well as men will make the world permanently safe for democracy.

I ask you, Mr. President and gentlemen of the Congress, in the words of our valiant and beloved leader, Inez Milholland Boissevain, "How long must women wait for liberty?"

ALVA E. BELMONT,
Chairman New York Branch, National Woman’s Party.
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BACKGROUND TO LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Mrs. Alva Belmont divorced one of the richest men in the world, William K. Vanderbilt, to marry another man, Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont. A central figure in New York high society, she later became a champion of women’s rights. After her second husband’s death, Belmont became a leader and benefactor of the National Woman’s Party. (NWP)

The National Woman’s Party, led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, had broken away from the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association in order to pursue a more militant strategy to pass a constitutional amendment for women’s suffrage (modeled after the tactics of British suffragettes and Susan B. Anthony’s civil disobedience). When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, the NWP picketed in front of the White House, protesting what they saw as President Wilson’s hypocrisy in endorsing democracy abroad but failing to support it for women at home.

Read Belmont’s letter to The New York Times justifying the use of these tactics and then answer the questions below.

QUESTIONS FOR LETTER TO THE EDITOR

1. What is Belmont protesting against in her letter?

2. How and where were the members of the NWP protesting?

3. What are three examples of NWP protestors using Wilson’s words to support women’s suffrage?

4. What happened to many of the women protesting in front of the White House? Why do you think government authorities reacted the way they did?

5. How do Belmont and the protestors contrast the democracy of the United States to that of its democratic allies in Europe?

6. “Militant” is a word used against the NWP protestors. How does Belmont respond to this characterization? Do you think it is fair to characterize their activities as militant?

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from The Suffragist, c. 1917, by Nina Allender
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POLITICAL CARTOON

The cartoon on page 36 is by Nina Allender, the National Woman’s Party’s (NWP) cartoonist and regular contributor to its magazine, The Suffragist.

QUESTIONS FOR CARTOON

1. Who does the man in the cartoon represent? Why is he holding a banner that reads “Democracy for the World”?

2. Who does the woman represent? Why is she holding a piece of paper reading “Democracy begins at home”?

3. Why is the man trying to hold back the woman? What does the expression on his face say to the reader?

4. Do you think that the NWP used good tactics? How could its tactics have backfired?

5. Can you think of other time periods, including our own, when protestors have used a war proclaimed in the name of democracy to advocate for greater democracy at home?